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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

JANUARY 1982

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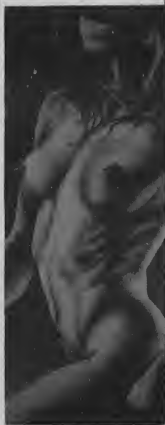
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Robert Silverberg

opinion

A COUPLE OF columns back I lamented the intrusion into science fiction publishing of picture-books — large hand-somely produced volumes made up entirely or almost entirely of lavish color plates of dragons or monsters or old magazine covers, which drain millions of dollars a year away from the purchase of the old-fashioned word-oriented fiction on which the whole fantasy-picture business is based. I expected some angry letters from the fans of Frazetta or Wayne Barlow or Chris Foss or the other splendid artists who do those books, but what I didn't expect was this angry message from Mark Cashman of Hartford, Connecticut:

"The decline of science-fiction literature that Bob Silverberg discusses in his 'Opinion' column (May '81) began when science fiction, embarrassed by its own optimism and view of man as an effective being, tried to become 'literature.' It took as its model the existentialist novel where disconnected or random events take the place of plot, where details and the exposition of defeatism take the place of character, and mysticism takes the place of logic in a malevolent universe beyond man's comprehension.

"The people who read science fiction want the experience of its spirit of human achievement, its view of man and his technology expanding his frontiers and his freedom.

"If Bob Silverberg really wants to know why there were more picture books than novels in that bookstore window, he should look to himself as one of those responsible. Look at your story, 'The Feast of St. Dionysus,' Bob. The story of a former astronaut wandering aimlessly through the desert until he joins and is sacrificed by a drunken, irrational religious cult. Or your novel *The World Inside*, the novel of a brutal, communo-religious

society, where men own nothing, not even themselves, and the penultimate act of freedom is to kill yourself. Or 'Tower of Glass,' where the climax is the act of destroying another man's achievement. You, Bob, and Delany and Russ and all of the other 'malevolent universe' literateurs, are responsible for the very condition you bemoan. You ought not complain so much."

Cashman's letter saddened me because he's obviously intelligent and literate, unlike most of the people who buy the pretty books full of pictures of dragons and full-breasted wenches. And yet what he wants is even dumber than what they want. They simply are after pretty pictures. No harm in that, really — I just came back from France, where I spent a few hours every day looking at pretty pictures in places like the Louvre. But what Cashman wants is to turn a literature that at its best provides penetrating insight into society, technology, science, and the human condition into a cheery, uplifting *Readers Digest* species of pap.

I deny, of course, that much of my own work can be described as "disconnected or random events" that "take the place of plot, where details and the exposition of defeatism take the place of character." I don't recognize that as typical of my fiction. But that's beside the point. Do people read science fiction to get a view of "man and his technology expanding his frontiers and his freedom"? Heck, they can simply walk outdoors and star at the nearest freeway, or a passing Boeing 747, if that's what they're after.

What about such science-fiction classics as *Brave New World*, 1984, *The Martian Chronicles*? Is Huxley's soma a virtuous use of technology? Do Orwell's torturers and brainwashers inspire a thrill at the recognition that technology

expands human freedom? Do the hot-dog stands that Bradbury's voyagers set up on Mars show us the spirit of human achievement?

Are those books deplorable? Have they gone without readers? Have they driven true fans to picture-albums?

Come off it, Cashman. Science-fiction writers, like any other writers, bring their personal visions of the universe to bear in their work. If they see a malevolent universe out there, or a world where communo-religious societies somehow tend to evolve, or where astronauts discover that their values are empty, they may write about those things, and if they do it eloquently and passionately enough they may create a work of art out of their vision of something bleak and disagreeable. Certainly they aren't responsible for the evils out there, nor are they required to provide cheery and sweet visions in the place of truth. The policemen don't cause the crimes; the finder of a counterfeit bill has no obligation to replace it with a valid one; the camera doesn't create the slum. The writer isn't making up dark stories just to be perverse and to annoy Mark Cashman.

The arguments that he puts forth are ones we heard a great deal a decade or so ago, when a horde of new writers began letting some truth about society creep into the world of science fiction, which previously had simply ignored the problem of evil. (When the villain takes a potshot at Luke Skywalker, that's not evil, it's just a nuisance. When you come out of Room 101 and you love Big Brother, you have experienced real evil.) The old s-f was strictly on the Luke Skywalker level; writers like Delany and Russ and Malzberg and Spinrad and Ellison and Lafferty and Disch and Dick and Brunner and, yes, Silverberg, let a little reality in, moved everything up to the next level of intensity, and changed the whole nature of science fiction. Some of the readers didn't like that.

Those readers, if they're still around, now buy the picture-books, or buy the simple cozy fantasy novels that are the poor equivalent of picture-books, or just spend their money on *Close Encounters of*

the Third Kind and *The Empire Strikes Back*. Okay. It's their money; it's their privilege to entertain themselves as they please.

But it saddens me to see intelligent people trotting out that weary old stuff about how much they hate existentialism or nihilism or pessimism or whatever in their science fiction. What they're asking for is a kind of juvenile see-no-evil-hear-no-evil speak-no-evil fiction. It is very hard for adult writers to write that kind of thing, if they take their craft at all seriously. It is very hard for non-adult readers to read what adult writers write. Maybe the problem is that the writers have grown up and the readers are still predominantly fourteen years old, at least between the ears.

"Human kind cannot bear very much reality," T.S. Eliot once wrote. Eliot is probably on Mark Cashman's hit-list too. But he spoke the truth.

Maybe it was a mistake to let so much reality into science fiction. Maybe we really ought to be turning out the kind of sweet bland positive-minded glop that the Cashmans of the world prefer. Huxley didn't think so, nor Orwell, nor Bradbury — but the first two weren't science-fiction writers at all, and Bradbury really isn't either. I am, and I have the Mark Cashmans to contend with. Go buy a picture-book, Mr. Cashman. It'll make you feel a lot happier.

Robert Silverberg

INFINITY ***

****, et cetera.

— Peter Payack



Photo by Vincent M. Tuzzo

Interview

LOYD BIGGLE, JR.: WHAT IS A MUSICOLOGIST DOING WRITING SCIENCE FICTION?

Tom Staicar

LOYD BIGGLE, JR. is unique among science fiction writers in that he has a Ph.D. in musicology. A soft-spoken, unassuming man, Biggle has written novels and short stories which have earned him a reputation as a professional in every sense of the word. His books are now in print around the world in languages such as Russian, Portuguese, Italian and Dutch. Many of them were Science Fiction Book Club selections. One of the charter members of the Science Fiction Writers of America, he was elected as an officer nine different years, and was selected by SFWA to edit the Nebula Awards story collection once, an honor he shares with Asimov, Anderson, Simak and LeGuin. More important to him, perhaps, is the fact that two different editors of the Nebula volumes dedicated their books to Biggle, in recognition of his many contributions to science fiction.

I visited Lloyd Biggle, Jr. at his home on tree-lined Dubie Street in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The fifty-seven-year-old writer uses a room in his home as a writing office, turning out a steady stream of carefully written material.

While his neighbors on Dubie Street are digging out their cars after a typical Michigan snowstorm to get to work on a given morning, Biggle is already at work, sitting at his typewriter at home. He ranks

this as one of the many pleasures of making a living solely by writing.

Beginning in childhood as an award-winning composer and clarinetist, he went on to earn a Master's Degree at the University of Michigan, followed by a Ph.D. in Musicology at the same institution in 1953. The subject of his doctoral dissertation was the polyphonic Mass compositions of fifteenth century French composer Antoine Brumel.

Talented in both music and writing, Biggle had a difficult time deciding upon a career to develop. He solved the dilemma by pursuing both. To this day he composes and plays music, recently delighting a science fiction convention audience by directing a group of madrigal singers in a concert of Biggle's own compositions. The subject of his Guest-of-Honor after dinner speech that evening was: "What is a musicologist doing writing science fiction?"

Asked how he got started as a writer, he told me: "I reached a point where I said to myself, if I don't give writing a try, I'll always feel frustrated about it. George Bernard Shaw worked at several occupations first and someone asked him about it and he said he was a natural born writer, so naturally he had to try everything else first."

After World War II, in which he received

a Purple Heart with oak leaf cluster during service with the U.S. Army 102nd Infantry Division, he returned to civilian life and eventually began his pursuit of a writing career. "I had the misfortune of entering the pulp magazine writing field just at the time when it was about to collapse. Television and paperback books wrecked it. One month there were dozens of pulps in all fields and a short while later all but two or three were gone."

"I trotted down to the newsstand to see what was selling and discovered there were more than twenty science fiction magazines there. I began writing science fiction."

Having written stories in a number of other fields, including mysteries and general fiction, Biggle tried his hand at sf. His dedication and perseverance finally paid off as he began to make a niche for himself in that genre. *Galaxy* published his first sf story "Gypped" in its July, 1956 issue. By 1957 he was the featured author on *If* and soon after had a story of his selected for a best-of-the-year anthology. Story sales followed in *Amazing*, *Astounding*, and other magazines.

Asked for advice on how to get started as a writer, Biggle recalled his own experience in that regard: "I simply started writing stories and sending them out to market. This is the only way to do it. Often a person will call me up, as a young man recently did, and ask what to do to get started in writing. I said, it's very easy. You roll a piece of paper into the typewriter and proceed one word at a time. That's the only way. You must learn to write just as you would learn to play the piano, or learn anything else, by practicing. You must develop a technique of writing. A lot of people are not aware of this. They think there's a pipeline from on high and all you have to do is hook into it and there you are. It doesn't work that way."

"I had some undergraduate classes in writing but at that time I was interested in being a poet. Poetry is an affliction of youth. It's an intensely personal thing. When we're young we're more romantic and the experiences we all have seem so much more vital and significant than they turn out to be in perspective. Poetry, of

course, is a way to express them."

"In the mid-1950's when I started writing, a standard procedure was almost universally followed. You started writing for the pulps and then you graduated to the slicks, like the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Redbook*. When the pulps were around with all those editors with a magazine to fill up, it was almost hard not to sell a story. There were pulps about racing, boxing, all kinds of romances. Westerns, and so on.

"After the pulps died out, I turned to science fiction and have made a career of writing it."

I asked him about making the change from short fiction to novels: "It's good to learn how to be a writer by writing short stories, but it is awfully hard to make a living at it now. At first, I held back on writing novels. There's a pace in writing and a few authors have no trouble switching back and forth from short pieces to long ones but a great many do. There have been some excellent writers of short stories who have never written novels. They're in a quandry because collections of stories don't sell as well as novels and publishers often have a policy that they will not publish a collection unless you are one of their regular novelists. Other writers write only novels and you rarely will see a short story from them. I started with stories and then when I got into writing novels I found that I rarely wrote short stories after that."

As if to show that he can still turn out a well-written short piece, he wrote a tale which was published in *Omni*. His Doubleday collection *A Galaxy of Strangers* shows a wide range of subjects covered by Biggle's short fiction, reprinted from several different sf magazines.

A full-time writer since around 1960, he is one of those rare people who can make his living at it. Many sf writers, as those in other fields, must write part-time unless they find themselves in the position of an Asimov, Clarke or Bradbury.

One advantage of full-time writing is setting one's own pace. "I work by the job," Biggle told me. "A lot of thinking must be done in writing. You run into a lot of problems that have to be solved and

there's no systematic, logical way to go about it. The solution may come when you're thinking of something else. The problem in each new story is never the same as the last.

"I think of myself as a storyteller. Poul Anderson will start with a planet, its orbit, the gravity, and the effects of the weather. I'm more interested in the people and their society, with social sciences rather than the hard sciences. I usually take an Earth-type planet."

One of his joys in writing is the knowledge that his books are popular not only in this country, but around the world. "It isn't widely known how popular science fiction is in foreign countries. My book *All the Colors of Darkness* which I wrote fifteen years ago, has recently been translated into Japanese." Biggle's collections and novels have now appeared in editions printed in Russian, Belgian, Dutch, German, Portuguese, and Italian. A friend returned from a vacation with a Biggle novel purchased on the Grand Turk Island in the Caribbean, and another friend wrote to him about seeing a French edition on sale at a newsstand in North Africa.

Biggle's original manuscripts are now housed in a special archive collection of the Spenser Research Library at the University of Kansas. His friend, Dr. James Gunn, himself a science fiction writer and historian, encouraged Biggle to donate them. "I figured it was a sensible thing to do," the modest Biggle said. "They were just stored in my attic anyway."

His most popular novels center around the characters of Jan Darzek, a detective, and his assistant the feisty Miss Schluppe. Both appear in his latest Doubleday hardcover novel *The Whirligig of Time*, as well as in such popular novels as *Silence Is Deadly* (Doubleday; also SF Book Club) and *Watchers of the Dark*.

On the origins of detective Jan Darzek, Biggle recalled: "I was writing quite a few mystery stories at one time and had the notion of putting a private detective in a science fiction setting and having him function in that role. He turned out to be a fine character to work with. In the first novel, he saves Earth; in the second he saves the galaxy. In the third book, he

saves the universe. It was difficult to plot a bigger story than that!

"I took a different tack entirely with the next one. In both *Silence Is Deadly* and *The Whirligig of Time* Darzek has to save a planet. I could go on with new planets forever but I'm not sure I will. Unlike Conan Doyle, I won't kill Jan Darzek off, however. He will be there if I need him again someday."

Asked what he considers the most pleasing aspect of his writing life, he told me: "Being published. I think all writers enjoy that most. It's pleasant to find people reading what you have written. SF writers are in an enviable position as opposed to others. If you look at bestsellers of the 50's and 60's and then try to find anyone who has read them, you'll find that the books made a big splurge once and then vanished. Few remember them today. But the SF books of all those years and even back to the 30's are still in print today, still being read today."

Lloyd Biggle has been able to combine music and writing upon occasion, integrating music into some of his published writings. *The Metallig Muse* is a collection of his stories which concern music and other arts in SF settings. Music played a role in his novel *The Still, Small Voice of Trumpets*, as well.

An interesting error related to music was printed on a Doubleday book jacket. The biographical notes stated that Biggle was a cellist. He had never played the cello, and had the copy corrected to "clarinetist" for future editions. A new secretary pulled out the erroneous information later on, and another book jacket repeated it. A British edition followed this with the same error intact. "Now I became an internationally famous cellist. This has now become a joke in SF fandom. Wherever I travel the fans introduce me as a famous cellist." Biggle admits he is now considering learning to play the instrument.

A project with far-reaching implications was started by Biggle, the Science Fiction Oral History Association. "We try to make tapes or get any existing tapes of SF history and important individuals. This is the outgrowth of a need that has existed from

the beginnings of tape recordings. Various important SF events were taped and no one knows what happened to those tapes. E.E. 'Doc' Smith's daughter said that a neighbor of theirs went to the Worldcon every year and taped everything, and when the next convention came along he erased it all and taped the next one. This kind of thing is tragic and we want to correct it.

"It's an enormous job because conventions are going on all the time. We'll never catch up but at least we have a start. We've collected some tapes and we have eight major university libraries that are interested in housing the tapes as depositories. These are such places as U. of Minnesota, U. of Kansas, Pennsylvania State U., Michigan State U., U. of Eastern

New Mexico, and Brigham Young University."

"We'd like to set up a listening station at every con so a fan could listen to tapes of speeches and panels there. And scholars could use the tapes so they could get the factual information from them without going all over the country."

Those interested in finding out more about the group, or joining it, should write to: SF Oral History Association, 117 Goodison, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197.

Whether writing, working for SFWA, or organizing an oral history group, Lloyd Biggle finds ways to make his contribution to science fiction, contributions that are lasting and valuable to the genre he loves.

The Book Reviews Interstellar Connection

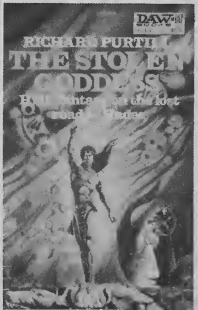
Tom Staicar

The Stolen Goddess By Richard Purtill. DAW Books, \$1.75. The influence of the late Thomas Burnett Swann is as apparent in *The Stolen Goddess* as it was in Purtill's recent fantasy novel *The Golden Gryphon Feather* (DAW Books, \$1.75). Both writers' works dealt with legendary pre-Athenian Crete, when leapers practiced the art of dancing in front of bulls and jumped over the animals' horns. His books will please Swann's admirers greatly but it is also clear that Richard Purtill's talents extend beyond mere imitation.

The Stolen Goddess begins with a few pages of historical perspective which threaten to bog down in wordiness. After that point, however, the story quickly builds an interest which is sustained through the rest of the novel. Ducallon, who seeks the throne of the land of Kaphu,

descends into the lower regions to rescue a goddess who has been abducted by an evil lord. The combination of mythological beings and average humans are important to the story, as demi-gods and three-headed beasts must be conquered along with people.

Those who enjoy mythological fantasy will consider Richard Purtill quite a find.



King David's Spaceship, by Jerry Pournelle (*Simon & Schuster, \$11.95*), *SF Book Club Edition available*. Jerry Pournelle is one of a handful of writers who can speculate knowledgeably about future worlds. His space program background, readings in science, and Ph.D.'s in psychology and political science allow him to carefully work out the logical development of a world and its societies.

King David's Spaceship is an improved and greatly expanded novel based in part upon *A Spaceship For the King* (DAW, 1973). I compared the two and saw that the new book is not in any sense a puffed-up version of the earlier one. On the contrary, it is a fine novel with fully realized characters and much more depth of background than the old one.

The novel concerns Nathan MacKinnin's scheme to save Prince Samuel's World from entering the huge galactic empire as an enslaved colony. To gain full voting membership, the planet must show evidence of advanced technology — and a working spaceship would prove that. This goal seems impossibly remote, and the obstacles in MacKinnin's path make it seem hopeless. An assortment of allies and a strong motivation of determination to succeed, coupled with a love of freedom, help this Heinlein-style hero as he sets out to rescue vital information from a forbidden library — data on space vehicles that could provide a quantum leap in technological sophistication for the planet.

I have always liked Jerry Pournelle's writing, and *King David's* is solidly entertaining all the way.

Writing For The Twilight Zone, by George Clayton Johnson (*Outre House, \$30.00 limited edition hardcover; \$7.50 trade paperback. Write to: 1622 N. Street, No. 302, Sacramento, CA 95814*). Johnson wrote four episodes of Rod Serling's epoch-making TV series, reprinted here in their entirety for the first time. We get a glimpse of screenwriting, with each script page representing about one minute of TV time, directions included. Johnson's writing techniques

verge on Hunter S. Thompson's "gonzo journalism" at times but his talent has brought him awards and acclaim.

Outre House also publishes *Web of Time* by Joseph Payne Brennan, an excursion into the poetry of supernatural horror consisting of macabre poems printed on decorated parchment pages.

The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to LeGuin, by Brian Attebery (*Indiana University Press, \$17.50*) is a look at the development of American fantasy. L. Frank Baum's Oz books, Bradbury's stories, and the writings of Andre Norton and Ursula K. LeGuin are examined in the context of the American literature of the fantastic, which began with folklore and fairy tales. Attebery's fresh approach and clear writing help make the book worth reading.

The Best of Omni Science Fiction No. 2, edited by Ben Bova and Don Myers. (\$3.75) contains fiction by people like Lloyd Biggle, Orson Scott Card, Theodore Sturgeon, and Robert Silverberg, along with the usual *Omni* blend of full color illustrations and striking art. Like the first selection, this is an "ideal issue" of the magazine — minus the two dozen or so pages of ads which usually appear. A good collection from a top source of science fiction.

The Literature of Fantasy: A Comprehensive, Annotated Bibliography Of Modern Fantasy Fiction, by Roger Schlobin (*Gorland, \$30.00 deluxe binding*) is a reference work listing fantasy novels, collections, and anthologies. You can use it to look up a given fantasy writer and find out exactly what was written, who published it, and when. There is a complete index to story and book titles and a useful introduction which discusses the scope of fantasy. Schlobin is one of the best-known and most respected scholars in the field and this is a valuable and exhaustive volume which should be found in all libraries as well as in the collections of fantasy readers and collectors.

Six Problems For Don Isidro Parodi,



by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy-Casares (Dutton, \$11.50) is the latest Borges book to be published in English. Parodi is a former barber who solves crimes for his many clients, all of whom are unperturbed by the fact that he is himself a convict. No matter how baffling the crimes, Parodi thinks his way to their solutions as people visit him in Cell 273. This is a humorous book which satirizes detective fiction, high class literary criticism, and the social roles of various people. I especially liked "The God of the Bulls" in which the author of *Cashiers of a Cowhand and Notes of a Poultry Wholesaler* seeks help from the detective-convict.

If you are not yet familiar with Borges, you might try either *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969* (Dutton trade paperback, \$3.95) which contains many of his most famous fantasy stories, or *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Dutton trade paperback, \$3.95) in which the Argentinian master examines fantastic creatures from literature and myth, with brief pieces concerning the Golem, the

Sphinx, the Rain Bird, and many others. Borges has been cited as a key influence upon the writings of leading sf and fantasy writers and is a writer who is highly respected around the world.

Starscapes, by Somtow Sucharitkul (From: The Suwon Fund, College of the Humanities, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL 33431. Stereo \$8.95; mono \$5.95. On cassettes only). This is a unique and unprecedented sf event: an original musical composition by Somtow Sucharitkul, based upon his "Inquestor" series of stories and performed by a musical ensemble which included Barry N. Malzberg on second violin. This premier performance will appeal to those who love experimental symphonic music. The composer-conductor was born in Thailand and educated at Eton, and he blends Eastern and Western influences in a serious and evocative musical composition.

Southern Illinois University Press has published the first four books in its *Alternatives* series and all four are winners.

The Science Fiction of Mark Clifton, edited by Borry N. Malzberg and Martin H. Greenberg (\$15.00) is a collection of tales by this long-neglected 1950's writer.

Fantastic Lives: Autobiographical Essays By Notable Science Fiction Writers, edited by Martin H. Greenberg (\$15.00) contains pieces by Ellison, Farmer, Spinrad, and others. I found A.E. van Vogt's the most thought-provoking as he manages to explore mind analysis, life prolongation, and some personal systems and theories, all within one essay!

Bridges To Science Fiction, edited by George E. Slusser, George R. Guffey, and Mark Rose (\$9.95) has essays about the genre as it relates to modern literature.

Astounding Science Fiction, July, 1939 (\$12.95) is the most fascinating volume in the series so far. It is a complete reprint of that issue — stories, ads, and all. A youngster named Asimov had his first Astounding sale (after breaking in at

Amazing) and Campbell introduced him this way: "A new author presents a new type of obstacle that may face the first rocket-ship's inventor . . ." "The Black Destroyer" introduced newcomer A.E. van Vogt. The ads are hilarious as they offer cures for dandruff (pour mouthwash on your scalp), a correspondence course to help you get a job in radio (the growing new field), and a way to save up to 30% on gasoline consumption (when a gallon cost about 15¢). Memoirs by Asimov, van Vogt, and Stanley Schmidt were added to this historic and entertaining look at the Golden Age.

On Writing Science Fiction (The Editors Strike Back), by the Editors of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*: George H. Scithers, Dorrell Schweitzer, & John M. Ford (Quilsworth Press, \$17.50). Surveys show that around half the readers of sf magazines are apprentice writers. This book is a golden opportunity to see behind the editorial office doors and find out why some stories make it and most others are given printed rejection slips. It gives writers — and readers — a chance to see what changes in a manuscript turned a near-miss into a first sale. The concise material about manuscript preparation and proofreader's symbols will be especially helpful to new writers, as will the breakdown of parts of a successful story.

Danse Macabre, by Stephen King (Everest House, \$13.95). If you can imagine the best-selling horror writer in the world being terrified, then you are ready to read this one. As a youngster, King was sometimes unable to sleep after hearing a scary radio program, reading a horrifying book, or seeing a frightening film. All this had its part in his development as the author of *Corrie*, *Firestarter*, and *The Shining*. *Danse Macabre* is a collection of King's thoughts about horror, but it surpasses the usual assortment of random pieces by a famous author. It gets deeply into the subject and is entertaining on every page. It seems that Stephen King only writes one way: grippingly. Even his non-fiction is superb.

The Science Fiction Reference Book, edited by B. Tynn (Sturmont, \$20.00 hardcover; \$14.95 trade paperback) is a wide-ranging book of expertly-written articles on sf which discuss fantastic cinema, fandom, sf classes, the history of sf, and much more. "Outstanding SF Books: 1927-1979" is a descriptive list which could form the basis for a personal reading program. This is a handbook that can be read through with pleasure.

Jules Verne: Classic Science Fiction; The Best of Jules Verne; The Science Fiction Rivals of H.G. Wells. Costle Books). Castle Books makes available classic science fiction at low prices (\$6-8 hardcovers in most stores). Each title volume is profusely illustrated. The Verne books contain three complete novels each, including *Clipper of the Clouds* and *Round the Moon*. The *Rivals* book features thirty-one stories reprinted from the British counterparts of the American pre-Gernsback pulps such as *The Strand* and *Pearson's Magazine*. The gaslit reading of the 1800's pitted British heroes against aliens who destroyed London (several times), while other characters had honeymoons in space and took grand tours of the solar system. All the Castle facsimile omnibus books are bargains.

Asimov On Science Fiction, by Isaac Asimov (Doubleday, \$14.95; SF Book Club edition available). If Isaac Asimov doesn't know science fiction, then who does? The creator of the all-time best trilogy and the Laws of Robotics takes us all on a tour of television, film, and written sf. The always present Asimov charm and wit are in full force as we learn what he thinks about conventions, awards, the science in sf, and much more. His advice to beginning writers and his thoughts about sf trends are essential reading. A breezy, highly rewarding Asimovian excursion. ●

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A Science Series Feature

TOWARD HUMAN IMMORTALITY

J. Ray Dettling

TO LIVE FOREVER with youthful vitality has been the quest of man for centuries. Every age in history has documented its attempt toward the achievement of this goal. The early Egyptians, for example, relied upon special rejuvenation formulas, some of which included such dubious ingredients as crocodile blood and sandalwood oil. During the time of Confucius, the emperors of China subscribed to trace quantities of gold and mercury to extend their lives. Ponce de Leon looked for the "Fountain of Youth" while others searched for the "Elixir of Life" which would render them eternally youthful.

What man was trying to do was alter the process of aging — the "ultimate disease" in which the body slowly deteriorates. Hair usually turns gray and thins out. The hearing mechanism loses some of its sensitivity. One's eyesight dims. The joints stiffen and swell while the muscles shrink and become weaker. Blood vessels lose their elasticity resulting in reduced circulation and increased blood pressure. The hormone output dwindles. Wrinkles set in as the skin dries out. The capacity of the heart and lungs diminish. The brain shrinks as 100,000 of its cells die each day. The efficiency of our immunological system is reduced and the body becomes increasingly vulnerable to such degenerative diseases as cancer, arteriosclerosis and diabetes. If none of these prove fatal, death will result from an aggregate of symptoms known simply as old age.

To most, old age is the final act — the prelude to death. It is the final state of existence that awaits us all if we manage to survive everything else on the way. It is the last stage of the universal disease afflicting us all. And it is 100 percent fatal.

Until the last decade, any hopes at reducing or reversing biological aging seemed none other than wishful thinking. Gerontologists (those who study the causes of aging) of today, however, are

dramatically changing this picture. As the mechanisms of aging are becoming more understandable on a biochemical level, most gerontologists are becoming more optimistic that genuine aging therapy will be available within the next 10 to 20 years, and many believe that by the year 2000 A.D. at least 20 years will be added to our life expectancy. After 2000 A.D. the predictions skyrocket as we shall see later in our discussion.

What causes aging? Gerontologists have suggested many theories. Some believe that at the cellular level we are all genetically programmed to die. Dr. Leonard Hayflick, a prominent gerontologist, has provided experimental evidence that human embryo cells can only divide a limited number of times (approximately 50) before dying. On further experiments with animals, Hayflick found a direct relationship between the animal's lifespan and the number of times their isolated cells could divide. Thus he concluded that we all have a built-in "death clock" or "time bomb" which is set at the time of birth. He further theorizes that this programmed "death clock" could possibly be turned off or reset by some appropriate genetic manipulation. Several gerontologists are already at work on this defusing mechanism.

Other gerontologists have focused their studies on the metabolic processes within the cells, and some have provided evidence that would seem to refute the "death clock" theory. In general, they contend that degeneration of the cell's basic metabolic processes, caused by a number of internal and external environmental factors, is the major cause of aging.

Many theories have been developed in an attempt to define these environmental factors and to understand exactly how they affect cellular metabolism. However, a great deal of experimental work over the last 15 years has narrowed these down to a single integrated theory that adequately

explains the major cause of aging in humans.

It goes something like this: Aging results from the cross-linking or the binding together of vital molecules within the body, such that these molecules can no longer function normally, and ultimately become immobilized. Among the most important of these molecules is collagen, a fibrous protein constituting about 40 percent of all the protein in our body, and DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) which contains the "blueprints" for the production of additional cells. In greatly simplified terms, the cross-linking of collagen reduces the efficiency of the body, while the cross-linking of DNA results in the production of daughter cells that are poor replicas of parent cells.

A more serious effect occurs when our white blood cells succumb to the ravages of cross-linking. These cells are the major components of our immune system. Their malfunction is manifested by their failure to protect us from a host of degenerative diseases, or even worse, they launch an attack on normal healthy cells resulting in a "bootstrap effect" which further escalates the body's deterioration.

Cross-linking is caused by the interaction of free radicals (extremely active chemicals). Free radicals, in turn, are formed from: elemental oxygen, radiation, stress, diet, and other aspects of our daily metabolism.

Can cross-linking be prevented? It appears from some of the latest findings that cross-linking, and thus the major cause of aging, can not only be prevented but may even be reversed.

Dr. Denham Harman of the University of Nebraska has experimented with antioxidants (chemicals that can deactivate free radicals). Several of these are: BHT (butylated hydroxytoluene) and Santocin which are commonly used as preservatives by the food packaging industry, Vitamin E, sodium hypophosphate, and 2-MEA (mercaptoethylamine) used for radiation detection. Using these chemicals, Dr. Harman has been able to increase the lifespan of mice by 50 to 70 percent. This corresponds to 120 years for humans.

Dr. Jeffrey Bland of the University of Puget Sound conducted experiments with Vitamin E, a known antioxidant, on human volunteers and discovered a remarkable aging resistance of red blood cells. Also, at the University of Berkeley, it was reported that a human fibroblast cell culture grown in a Vitamin E medium, survived more than twice as long as cells grown in the absence of Vitamin E. In fact, after 120 divisions, the cells still appeared healthy. This greatly exceeds the 50 cell division limit postulated by Hayflick.

In 1973, Dr. Richard Hochschild of the Microwave Instruments Company in Del Mar, California, demonstrated a 40 percent increase in the lifespan of mice injected with Centrophoxine. This drug, currently used in Europe to alleviate mental disorders in elderly patients, has no apparent toxic side effects even in high dosages.

Dr. Johan Bjorksten, a leading gerontologist, is conducting research with soil bacteria enzymes that could slow down or even reverse the aging effects of cross-linkage.

Other approaches were aimed at preventing - or at least reducing the formation of free radicals in our normal metabolism.

As early as 1935, and many times since, laboratory studies have demonstrated that restricted diets can increase the lifespan of rats by as much as 30 percent.

In 1935 the result was surprising. Today it is expected, since it is consistent with the basic theory of aging. The number of free radicals produced is directly related to the amount of food our bodies take in. Other diet restriction studies have shown a reduced susceptibility to certain diseases such as cancer and diabetes.

Recently, Dr. Roy Walford, a UCLA pathologist and author of "The Immunologic Theory of Aging", has shown that when restricted diets were given to aged mice, their immune system displayed a remarkable rejuvenation. These results have been confirmed by several other investigators. Finally, Charles L. Goodrick of the Gerontology Research Center reported at the 1979 annual meeting of the Gerontological Society that recent

experimental findings suggest that periodic fasting promotes a 30 to 40 percent longer lifespan in rats, and encourages more vigorous activity at a later age.

It is a well known fact that lowering body temperature slows the aging process. The stickleback fish, for example, has a normal lifespan of about 18 months. One researcher showed that in sub-polar regions their life expectancy increases by several hundred percent. In fact, in a series of tests, it took several years just to reach sexual maturity compared to only a few months in warmer waters. Dr. Bernard Strehler of the University of Southern California stated that a reduction of just three degrees Fahrenheit could well add 30 years to human life.

One should therefore expect Eskimos to live longer than, say, Hawaiians or Africans, but this is clearly not the case. The explanation is simple. Humans, like all mammals, are warm blooded and maintain a constant internal temperature regardless of the temperature of their environment. Certain drugs, such as aspirin and marijuana, can lower body temperature. The catch is that not only aging, but all chemical processes in the body, including our mental processes, would also slow down as the temperature is lowered. This would be an unacceptable price to pay.

But can we have our cake and eat it too? Dr. Richard Cutler of the National Institute of Aging (NIA) thinks so. In one rather outlandish approach, Cutler suggested that a tiny ceramic device could be implanted in a blood vessel leading to the base of the hypothalamus. During periods of sleep, low intensity microwave radiation would be directed toward the implant, which subsequently would increase in temperature and warm the surrounding blood. The hypothalamus (which regulates body temperature) will sense the warm blood and, "thinking" the body was experiencing a fever, will correspondingly adjust the body temperature downward. Once awake, the device would be turned off and normal body temperature resumed. The user would not feel any ill effects, but would

experience a significantly increased lifespan.

Perhaps the most bizarre approach of all is the one first proposed by Robert C.W. Ettinger in his book "The Prospect of Immortality." He suggests that immediately after death, or even before death, one may be frozen and stored in liquid nitrogen at minus 320 degrees Fahrenheit until such time when medical science can resuscitate and cure him from his specific ailment as well as the damage induced by the freezing process. This may be looked upon as the limiting case of slowing the aging process by reducing body temperature. At the present time over a dozen people have been frozen immediately after death and are awaiting a future time when they can be fully restored.

At the University of California and at NIH's Gerontology Research Center, a surgical technique called parabiosis was performed in which aged organisms were connected to young organisms like siamese twins. Thus the blood of the young subject could mix with the blood of the older subject. The aged organisms showed immediate signs of rejuvenation and greatly outlived the animals in the control group.

Dr. Takashi Makinodan of NIA has conducted experiments wherein one class of white blood cells, called T cells, were removed from young rats and injected into old rats. An immediate rejuvenation of the older rat's immunological system resulted. This same technique may be available to humans, either through young healthy donors with matching tissues or from one's own body, but taken early in life and kept frozen in storage. This type of "biological social security" is already scheduled for clinical tests within the next year.

The above represents only a brief summary of what has been going on in aging research. As exciting as these results may sound, the future is even brighter since the funding in to aging research has steadily increased from less than \$1 million per year in the late 60's to over \$37 million for fiscal 1978. The recently formed National Institute of

Aging, which is a division of the National Institute of Health, is a clear indication that serious work is being planned in this new glamorous area of biomedical research.

Is there anything we can do right now? Yes. Although most studies to date have been performed on animals, a significant amount of data is directly applicable to humans. Gerontologists have outlined several guidelines for us to follow. These guidelines reflect a conservative low profile approach, but collectively they will add anywhere from 10 to 20 years to our life expectancy. Specifically they are:

- 1) Supplement our daily diet with FDA approved antioxidants — Vitamin E, C and 50 micrograms of Selenium for starters.
- 2) Engage in a regular exercise program.
- 3) Avoid excess amounts of sugar, coffee and alcohol.
- 4) By all means, stop smoking.
- 5) Lose any excess weight.
- 6) Get plenty of sleep.
- 7) Lower caloric intake to that necessary to maintain your ideal weight. This is probably somewhere near 1500 calories.
- 8) Avoid exposure to X-ray, microwave and ultraviolet radiation.

If we follow these simple guidelines, not only will we be slowing down our aging process, but also our general physical well being will be enhanced. Furthermore the added time we will have gained will make it possible for us to share in new aging therapies that would hitherto be unavailable.

We have every reason to expect that early in the 21st century, great strides will be made on this biological forefront. A recent Rand Corporation Study concluded that by the year 2020 (only 40 years hence) we will have added 50 years to the human lifespan. A remarkable prediction because it implies that we are closer to death today than we will be 40 years from now if we maintain good health.

From an evolutionary viewpoint, the only requirement for survival of the species through time is that its birth rate equal or exceed its death rate. Once this occurs, the evolutionary process becomes indifferent and finds no advantage to

preserve random mutations that would refine the organism to live beyond this threshold. The important thing here is that our present lifespans are limited, not because of any fundamental obstacle or biological limit, but simply because there was no reason for nature to carry it further. This means that the door is wide open, and it is now up to us to continue where natural selection has left off.

And even if only half of what the gerontologists predict is true, we may all look forward to a dramatically increased life expectancy in the near future. Dramatically, because of the inherent synergistic effect that occurs in aging research. Once we are granted extra years of life, we also become eligible to reap the benefits of yet additional breakthroughs adding even more years and so on. We are rapidly approaching the point (and we may already be there) where our life expectancy will increase at the same rate or greater than our chronological aging. In other words, we will be gaining years faster than we can spend them. When this happens our life expectancy becomes infinite (barring accidents and as yet incurable illnesses).

But is an indefinitely long lifespan desirable? What about overpopulation? Will our society become stagnant putting everything off until tomorrow? Will people still be willing to take risks for the betterment of society or will they hide within themselves, overprotecting their bundle of years like a miser hoards his gold?

Many of these questions cannot be answered with absolute certainty, but some general statements can be made. No one doubts that the conquest of aging will have a profound effect on society, and most would even admit that it is counterproductive to our population problem. If society does not make the necessary adjustments the effect will surely be negative. If you can't see this, take one look at our Social Security System as an example. It is the closest thing to a giant chain letter with the many young supporting the few elderly. But modern medicine has shifted the ratio of old to young, and the promise of a cure for

cancer and the cardiovascular diseases will change this ratio even further. Yet I know of no one who would not welcome the cure for cancer, regardless of any population problem. Likewise, very few of the elderly would shun a rejuvenation cocktail.

What about population? Given a fixed amount of land and resources, there are only two solutions to the population problem: Increase the death rate or decrease the birth rate. Limited by these choices, the latter is the only acceptable one. Clearly, once a person is alive and aware of his existence, he has the right to continue his life. And this right is greater than the rights of those who as yet do not exist. Thus, simply from a moralistic standpoint, birth control is the only solution.

But wait! We do have more land and resources — infinitely more. It is a remarkable coincidence that the conquest of aging is occurring simultaneously with the conquest of space. Soon (surely within the next hundred years) space will be accessible to all, and birth control will only be required on those pieces of real estate that have reached their population limit. Furthermore, even population limits are only temporary. A thousand years ago, without modern technology, the earth could not have supported our current population of 4 billion people.

Modern technology, to a large extent contributed to overpopulation, but it also has provided for these increased numbers, through high density farming, energy production and distribution, transportation, etc. Likewise if the conquest of aging results in increased population, the technologies of tomorrow will provide synthetic foods, unlimited energy and the infinite resources of space. With these possibilities looming, birth control may only be necessary for a short time.

As far as society degenerating to stagnation, there are arguments against this also. It is inconceivable that anyone would want to spend 2-3-500 years or more in stagnation. Those who desire extended lives are typically those who lead full, rich lives, and there is every reason to believe that any additional time would be spent

equally as full. Who wouldn't want to give Albert Einstein, Leonardo Da Vinci or Benjamin Franklin a few hundred more years to work out their problems. It is those without any direction in life who often tend toward stagnation. They may find themselves in that situation regardless of anti-aging therapies. In fact, a person without any direction may force himself to find a direction if he is confronted with a lifetime of several centuries.

And with respect to taking risks, in the distant future very few risks will need to be taken. Machines will be available to take the place of man in virtually all hazardous situations. For the few special cases where risks need to be taken by man, there will still be plenty who would be willing to take them. After all, there will always be the few who do not want immortality.

The bottom line is: Should aging research be funded? The answer is an unequivocal YES. For the same reasons that cancer and other degenerative diseases are funded. Indeed the control of aging would be the most significant breakthrough in the history of science, for the conquest of aging will be the conquest of time.

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Detting is currently working on advanced propulsion systems three days a week. On the other extreme, he has been playing with a five-piece band one night a week. He also lectures, and is completing a book, "Futures Fantastic," upon which this series is based.

intercom

Intercom seeks letters discussing ideas expressed in articles or fiction on our pages: or something that may be of general interest to our readers.

Kicks & Kudos for July

Dear Elinor, Britton & Anna:

Once again I had to leave my comfortable, decaying neo-ghetto, cross a few light-years of suburban non-community and enter hostile territory to buy the latest *Amazing*. Plain ol' Covina is a place where the streets are filled with folks dressed like a flashback to Des Moines, Iowa in 1947; they boldly cross the streets at a snail's pace, having just left church and feeling so righteous that they know if you run 'em over they'd blast-off straight for Heaven (that's *their* fantasy). It makes me uneasy, but down the street from a theater that the Mayor and some Righteous Citizens busted for showing classy films that occasionally were rated "X" so it's now shows last year's drive-in flicks (only 99¢ a seat) there's a bookstore that sells *Amazing*. They also have a John Birch Society book & flag store. I wonder if they sell *Amazing* there? I'd go and ask, but my hair is too long and my skin is too brown and there's likely to be a loaded .357 Magnum under the cash register. I'd cause the DANGER: ALIEN! alarm to go off in the clerk's head and . . . No, don't

even think it — go back to the neo-ghetto, where just about anything goes because nobody knows what a neo-ghetto is supposed to be like, think of that recent night when me & the gang were wandering the crowded streets of Westwood amid Hare Krishnas, jugglers, fire-eating mimes, saxophonists, 11-year-old slutettes giving come-hither looks, black cowboys on 10-foot tall unicycles, young ladies in Medieval costume who grope for each other through the crowd that consisted of other kinds of aliens and mutants. California is full of aliens and mutants, some of which read science fiction and fantasy.

The cover (and all the art) of the July '81 issue was great, though personally I prefer the far-out funkiness of Kent Bash last issue, but Vincent DiFate paints with real class. Besides, people who don't want to be thought of as crazy, as Barry N. Malzberg pointed out, don't want to know that they may be getting into something really weird, but keep the magazine looking as good as it has the last couple of issues and you'll attract the straight-laced types, who, still high from their last fix of Corporate Science Fiction and out looking for MORE will see your classy-looking little mag, buy it, enjoy the more conventional offerings, then rub their frontal lobes in things like "The Naked Matador", "The

Nosepickers of Dawr", "The Butter Lady" and "Raving Lunacy". The DANGER: ALIEN! alarm will start flashing in their skulls and they'll think: Hey, wait a minute! I KINDA LIKE THESE ALIENS! They make life interesting and a lot more fun! They would read more really amazing science fiction and fantasy. More and more people will start letting their imaginations take those Dangerous Leaps and maybe by the year 2000 the whole planet will be a circus/party scene like Westwood on a Saturday night only WRIT LARGE with aliens and mutants and even mythical beings living fantastic lives and going on tour throughout the Solar System, the Galaxy, the Universe, etc., etc. . . . (that's my fantasy).

Speaking of fantasy, with all respects to Rick Parks, I had some trouble with "The Passing". It was a nice story, and I liked the idea, but there's this thing that bothers me about sword&sorcery stories like it. It's that they all seem to be taking place in front of that same old Medieval Anglo-European backdrop that was originally painted by Romantics back in the 19th century and has been dusted off and kept in good repair ever since. WHY IS FANTASY SO GODDAM ANGL0? I'm going to have to write a definitive essay by that title someday. A fantasy story in a pre-industrial society doesn't have to take place in that same, old tired setting. It takes more than the thought of people in Medieval garb to set my sense-of-wonder a-throbbing; it remained in check a few days ago while wandering through Pasadena when I discovered that the streets were full of people dressed in that fashion. There are other continents on this planet besides Europe — which isn't quite big enough to be considered a continent if you check it out on a globe — what about Asia, Africa, Australia, all those islands, and even the Americas? Those are cultures and mythologies that fantasy writers haven't tapped yet, but we still get story after story in that same, worn out setting that is so easy to imagine because this culture is biased toward fairy tales from one small part of this planet.

This isn't to say that good stories can't be written in the good old, handy dandy

Medieval world. Darrell Schweitzer's "Raving Lunacy" is a perfect example of a writer taking it and making it all new and fresh again with unusual characters, wit and lots of originality. I can hardly wait for "Continued Lunacy". May Nick and Tom wander all over that 19th century Medieval backdrop, tearing it to shreds, and creating it anew, really making that dream live again!

I just want fantasy fiction to be as amazing and fantastic as possible, and let's wipe out White Supremacy in imaginative literature before the year 2000 while we're at it.

Keep it up, keep getting better,

Ernest,

Ernest Hogan
West Covina, Calif.

Anyone care to pick up on this topic? Could be interesting. And, Ernest, thanks for appreciating what we're doing here.
— EM

Dear Ms. Mavor:

I've been watching your magazine for some time now. When you started running reprints I just kinda ignored you but when I discovered that you were running original material again I felt free to pick up your 'zine again. I get the impression that you don't like the type of letter I'm going to write, but, there's nothing I can do about that. However feed free to dissect, edit, censor, blue-pencil, abbreviate, abridge or condense as you see fit, after all you're the boss.

Vince DiFate always (at least to me anyway) looks like he's ripping off John Berkey's style. I'm sure that's not true, but still . . . anyway the cover was not even one of DiFate's better efforts as it seems very bland and unimaginative.

About the editorial, Malzberg has got to be the biggest crybaby of science fiction I've read yet. Like the actor who can't act or the musician who can't play, Malzberg seems to like to blame everybody for his own problems. He should read

Silverberg's column because he's evidently been taking his own press releases too seriously. Nobody loves him or his work because they are understandable; none of his stories ever have any decent characters or decent character development, plot or story structure.

Is sf becoming too conservative? No. At least I don't think so. In fact, I believe sf is going the way music is going. That is, back to the basics. Good story structure, strong plot and strong characters. Stories with a beginning, middle and end. I think that what almost killed science fiction was what evidently Malzberg likes. You know — mindless, idiotic, pyrotechnical stylistics, meaningless style experimentation, non-stories and what Darrell Schweitzer used to call "non functional word puzzles".

I still contend that speculative fiction is written by science fiction writers who don't have the talent to write good science fiction and who are too lazy to write good science fiction.

One must remember that speculative fiction is a bastard son of a bastard son (adventure, scientific romances, scientification, science fiction, sci-fi and speculative fiction).

Robert Adams did not disappoint me at all. Usually just to prove how big, bad and tough their heroes are the authors would have had their heroes kill the giant cat, but Robert Adams didn't, and making the cat intelligent, what a topper. I'm going to have to read the novel when it comes out. Will it have the same title as the story? I must urge you to get more by Adams. How about a serial, and if not, how about some more short stories or novelettes? More, more.

Maybe I'm missing something but Roger Zelazny's "story" didn't turn me on at all. While I'm sure you picked it up because it was Roger Zelazny (and I don't expect you to admit it) I still think that you should have held off on this one. While I'm sure that Zelazny tried to impress us that he can imitate Hemingway I don't think he pulled it off. The story succeeded in asking and creating more questions than it answered. That is unless, that Zelazny plans to write more stories but even so he is not playing

fair with the readers. Who is the main character and why is he being chased? Who is Emily? Who is Percy? I hate obscure symbolism.

Ron Goulart's Plumrose wasn't bad at all. It was pretty good for a young Ron Goulart. Maybe you can reprint more? Even better see if you can get some of those unpublished ones or get Goulart to write some new ones. It seems that Ron Goulart was there a long time before *Time After Time*. It's sad but every time Ron Goulart creates and develops a character, he loses interest just when everyone wants more. The list is legion: Jose Silvera, Plumrose, Gypsy, Ben Jolsen of The Chameleon Corp, John Easy, and most recently Jake Connor of the Wild Talents division and now Odd Job, Inc. There was also a ghost breaker in there somewhere, I'm sure.

For some reason I thought of Adolf Hitler while reading Elizabeth Morton's story "Namesake". The first half wasn't too bad but the last half lost me. Considering the story was only one whole page long I'm sure the story made great filler.

Ova Hamlet's (Richard Lupoff's) parody of *Gor* summed up all that is bad and even worse about the *Gor* books. The *Gor* books give me an eye ache when I read them. They do serve a purpose and that is they help me get to sleep when I have insomnia. The Hamlet story will have to stand on its own because anything I have to say about it would be superficial. I did like it however and it's sad that parody is never taken seriously when it comes time to hand out awards.

Ken Doggit has been reading too much Fredric Brown. My type of fellow. Brown used to be a master of short shorts and especially short shorts about time travel and paradoxes and Mr. Doggit seems to have found yet another twist in the form of a short short. Of course it's science fiction. My hat's off to Mr. Doggit and I'm looking forward to more.

James Patrick Kelly is familiar to me from his stories in *F&SF*. His story here is just as good as any of those, and I must say I'm looking forward to more from him also. As for the story, I'm just glad somebody

could find something original to say on the first contact theme.

Richard Parks "The Passing" did seem like a part of a series or a novel. I would like to see more of Taleera. Maybe more short stories.

"The Butter Lady" definitely deserves to be in the next "Year's Best Horror Stories" anthology because Ron Montana definitely has written a very neat, very short horror story.

Alicia Austin's artwork is all good except that I didn't know that the main characters in Darrell Schweitzer's story were gay. If they weren't why did Austin give them a gay wish? I found it (the illo) distasteful. The story seemed a trifle too long but other than that it both interesting and fun. It certainly was different and ranks right up there with the best of Mr. Schweitzer's fanzine work. I liked his recent "Etelvin Thio" story trilogy in the recent two *Weirdbooks* a little better than this story. This story was really good, anyhow.

Robert Brown's "No Smoking" was a pretty fine short short too. Are you going to start publishing a lot of these little stories, or was this issue a coincidence? I liked "No Smoking" anyway and it seems just wishful thinking. A good way to solve the problem of illiteracy.

I've been seeing Wayne Wightman's name appearing in your 'zine for awhile and with this issue decided to read one of his stories with this issue and didn't find it wanting. It was indeed quite good and I'm sure Wayne Wightman is going to be a name to watch in the future.

The two science shorts in the back were interesting and I hope you include more of them in the future issues of *Amazing*.

Keep the "Hall of Fame". I know I'm in the minority but your Hall of Fame is worth reading. Much better than an earlier version of this magazine's "Hall of Fame". With author's introductions and new illos, no less. Yours is just as good as the "Hall of Fame" that ran in the old *Startling Stories* (now there was a magazine, it started off with a whole novel). Anyway keep it.

I've been reading science fiction for fifteen years and yes, science fiction is a way of life.

M. Louis Baumgart
Ortonville, Mich.

If *sf* were to stick to formula and avoid experimentation, we would have the kind of literature totally pleasing to you (and to Mark Cashman, whom Robert Silverberg addresses in this issue's "Opinion"). Malzberg's point is well taken — a body of literature that isn't experimenting could face a gloomy future, indeed. By the way, if you grab a copy of Bullfinch's *Mythology and read Perseus and Medusa*, Zelazny's story will snap into focus. Thanks for your comments. — EM

Dear Editor/Intercom/and everyone else,

As a thirty-year fan of the solitary genus, I have written only two letters — one to *F&SF* (answered), and one to Robert Silverberg, a long time ago (also answered). So, I don't write since I hate to think of all the time I'm wasting — valuable creative time of talented people. (I get the distinct feeling that there are plenty of people writing letters anyway.)

This, then, is an exception. Reason: Your magazine is a new magazine and I appreciate it. The Shaw interview directly prompted this — a fine piece and an honest man. The new or revised or whatever format is also fine and honest. And above all, *delight*: you seem delighted to be doing what you are doing and it results in my delight. Why read it at all, otherwise?

Look — I'm not a writer and this is becoming a jungle of words to me. So — thank you. Good job. Good luck. Work your buns off. Keep smiling. I'll keep reading & buying. And being delighted. I didn't before (regularly) but I will now.

Jim Huntley
Terre Haute, Ind. **
**You don't have to answer. (Save your stamps.) (And I liked all the stories and their number!)

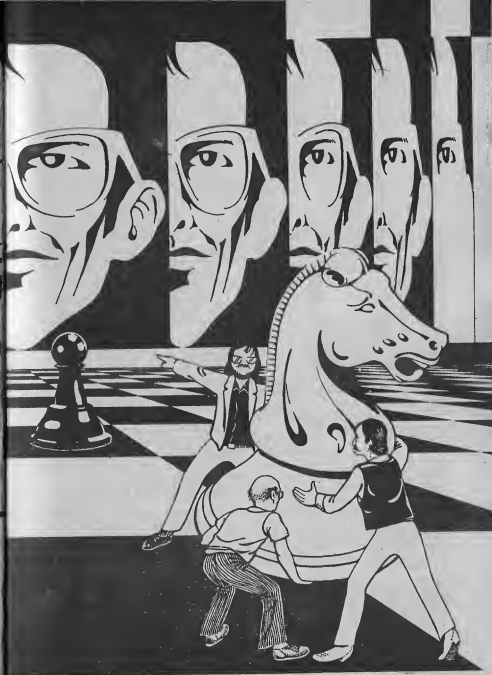
The editor and Everyone Else says Thank you! — EM ●



George R.R. Martin

Unsound Variations

Soon to be appearing in *Unsound Variations*, a science fiction/chess anthology, edited by Fred Saberhagen for Ace.



AFTER they swung off the Interstate, the road became a narrow two-lane that wound a tortuous path through the mountains in a series of switchbacks, each steeper than the last. Peaks rose all around them, pine-covered and crowned by snow and ice, while swift cold waterfalls flashed by, barely seen, on either side. The sky was a bright and brilliant blue. It was exhilarating scenery, but it did nothing to lighten Peter's mood. He concentrated blindly on the road, losing himself in the mindless reflexes of driving.

As the mountains grew higher, the radio reception grew poorer, stations fading in and out with every twist in the road, until at last they could get nothing at all. Kathy went from one end of the band to the other, searching, and then back again. Finally she snapped off the radio in disgust. "I guess you'll just have to talk to me," she said.

Peter didn't need to look at her to hear the sharpness in her tone, the bitter edge of sarcasm that had long ago replaced fondness in her voice. She was looking for an argument, he knew. She was angry about the radio, and she resented him dragging her on this trip, and most of all she resented being married to him. At times, when he was feeling very sorry for times, when he was feeling very sorry for himself, he did not even blame her. He had not turned out to be much of a bargain as a husband; a failed writer, failed journalist, failing businessman, depressed and depressing. He was still a lively sparring partner, however. Perhaps that was why she tried to provoke fights so often. After all the blood had been let, one or both of them would start crying, and then they would usually make love, and life would be pleasant for an hour or two. It was about all they had left.

energy, and his mind was on other things. "What do you want to talk about?" he asked her. He kept his tone amicable and his eyes on the road.

"Tell me about these clowns we're going to visit," she said.

"I did. They were my teammates on the chess team, back when I was at

Northwestern."

"Since when is chess a team sport anyway?" Kathy said. "What'd you do, vote on each move?"

"No. In chess, a team match is really a bunch of individual matches. Usually four or five boards, at least in college play. There's no consultation or anything. The team that wins the most individual games wins the match point. The way it works —"

"I get it," she said sharply. "I may not be a chessplayer, but I'm not stupid. So you and these other three were the Northwestern team?"

"Yes and no," Peter said. The Toyota was straining; it wasn't used to grades this steep, and it hadn't been adjusted for altitude before they took off from Chicago. He drove carefully. They were up high enough now to come across icy patches, and snow drifting across the road.

"Yes and no," Kathy said sarcastically. "What does that mean?"

"Northwestern had a big chess club back then. We played in a lot of tournaments — local, state, national. Sometimes we fielded more than one team, so the line-up was a bit different every tournament. It depended on who could play and who couldn't, who had a midterms, who'd played in the last match — lots of things. We four were Northwestern's B team in the North American Intercollegiate Team Championships, ten years ago this week. Northwestern hosted that tournament, and I ran it, as well as playing."

"What do you mean B team?"

Peter cleared his throat and eased the Toyota around a sharp curve, gravel rattling against the underside of the car as one wheel brushed the shoulder. "A school wasn't limited to just one team," he said. "If you had the money and a lot of people who wanted to play, you could enter several. Your best four players would make up your A team, the real contender. The second four would be the B team, and so on." He paused briefly, and continued with a faint note of pride in his voice. "The nationals at Northwestern were the biggest ever held, up to that time, although of course that record has since

been broken. We set a second record, though, that still stands. Since the tournament was on our home grounds, we had lots of players on hand. We entered six teams. No other school has ever had more than four in the nationals, before or after." The record still brought a smile to his face. Maybe it wasn't much of a record, but it was the only one he had, and it was his. Some people lived and died without ever setting a record of any kind, he reflected silently. Maybe he ought to tell Kathy to put his on his tombstone: **HERE LIES PETER K. NORTEN. HE FIELDIED SIX TEAMS.** He chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

She didn't pursue it. "So you ran this tournament, you say?"

"I was the club president and the chairman of the local committee. I didn't direct, but I put together the bid that brought the nationals to Evanston, made all the preliminary arrangements. And I organized all six of our teams, decided who would play on each one, appointed the team captains. But during the tournament itself I was only captain of the B team."

She laughed. "So you were a big deal on the second-string. It figures. The story of our life."

Peter bit back a sharp reply, and said nothing. The Toyota swerved around another hairpin, and a vast Colorado mountain panorama opened up in front of them. It left him strangely unmoved.

After a while Kathy said, "When did you stop playing chess?"

"I sort of gave it up after college. Not a conscious decision, really. I just kind of drifted out of it. I haven't played a game of tournament chess in almost nine years. I'm probably pretty rusty by now. But back then I was fairly good."

"How good is fairly good?"

"I was rated as a Class A player, like everyone else on our B team."

"What does that mean?"

"It means my USCF rating was substantially higher than that of the vast majority of tournament chess players in the country," he said. "And the

tournament players are generally much better than the unrated woodpushers you encounter in bars and coffee houses. The ratings went all the way down to Class E. Above Class A you had Experts, and Masters, and Senior Masters at the top, but there weren't many of them."

"Three classes above you?"

"Yes."

"So you might say, at your very best, you were a fourth-class chess player."

At that Peter did look over at her. She was leaning back in her seat, a faint smirk on her face. "Bitch," he said. He was suddenly angry.

"Keep your eyes on the road!" Kathy snapped.

He wrenched the car around the next turn hard as he could, and pressed down on the gas. She hated it when he drove fast. "I don't know why the hell I try to talk to you," he said.

"My husband, the big deal," she said. She laughed. "A fourth-class chess player playing on the junior varsity team. And a fifth-rate driver, too."

"Shut up," Peter said furiously. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about. Maybe we were only the B team, but we were good. We finished better than anyone had any right to expect, only a half-point behind Northwestern A. And we almost scored one of the biggest upsets in history."

"Do tell."

Peter hesitated, already regretting his words. The memory was important to him, almost as important as his silly little record. He knew what it meant, how close they came. But she'd never understand, it would only be another failure for her to laugh at. He should never have mentioned it.

"Well?" she prodded. "What about this great upset, dear? Tell me."

It was too late, Peter realized. She'd never let him drop it now. She'd needle him and needle him until he told her. He sighed and said, "It was ten years ago this week. The nationals were always held between Christmas and New Year's, when everyone was on break. An eight-round team tournament, two rounds a day. All of

our teams did moderately well. Our A team finished seventh overall."

"You were on the B team, sweetie." Peter grimaced. "Yes. And we were doing best of all, up to a point. Scored a couple nice upsets late in the tournament. It put us in a strange position. Going into the last round, the University of Chicago was in first place, alone, with a 6-1 match record. They'd beaten our A team, among their other victims, and they were defending national champions. Behind them were three other schools at 5½-1½. Berkeley, the University of Massachusetts, and — I don't know, someone else, it doesn't matter. What mattered was that all three of those teams had already played U of C. Then you had a whole bunch of teams at 5-2, including both Northwestern A and B. One of the 5-2 teams had to be paired against Chicago in the final round. By some freak, it turned out to be us. Everyone thought that clinched the tournament for them."

"It was really a mismatch. They were the defending champions, and they outrated us by hundreds of points on every board. It should have been easy. It wasn't."

"It was never easy between U of C. and Northwestern. All through my college years, we were the two big midwestern chess powers, and we were arch-rivals. The Chicago captain, Hal Winslow, became a good friend of mine, but I gave him a lot of headaches. Chicago *always* had a stronger team than we did, but we gave them fits nonetheless. We met in the Chicago Intercollegiate League, in state tournaments, in regional tournaments, and several times in the nationals. Chicago won most of those, but not all. We took the city championship away from them once, and racked up a couple other big upsets too. And that year, in the nationals, we came this close" — he held up two fingers, barely apart — "to the biggest upset of all." He put his hand back on the wheel, and scowled.

"Go on," she said. "I'm breathless to know what comes next."

Peter ignored the sarcasm. "An hour into the match, we had half the tournament gathered around our tables,

watching. Everyone could see that Chicago was in trouble. We clearly had superior positions on two boards, and we were even on the other two.

"It got better. I was playing Hal Winslow on third board. We had a dull, even position, and we agreed to a draw. And on fourth board, E.C. gradually got outplayed and finally resigned in a dead lost position."

"E.C.?"

"Edward Colin Stuart. We all called him E.C. Quite a character. You'll meet him up at Bunnish's place."

"He lost?"

"Yes."

"This doesn't sound like such a thrilling upset to me," she said dryly. "Though maybe by your standards, it's a triumph."

"E.C. lost," Peter said, "but by that time, Delmaro had clearly busted his man on board two. The guy dragged it out, but finally we got the point, which tied the score at 1½-1½, with one game in progress. And we were winning that one. It was incredible. Bruce Bunnish was our first board. A real turkey, but a half-decent player. He was another A player, but he had a trick memory. Photographic. Knew every opening backwards and forwards. He was playing Chicago's big man." Peter smiled wryly. "In more ways than one. A Master name of Robinson Vesselere. Damn strong chessplayer, but he must have weighed four hundred pounds. He'd sit there absolutely immobile as you played him, his hands folded on top of his stomach, little eyes squinting at the board. And he'd crush you. He should have crushed Bunnish easily. Hell, he was rated four hundred points higher. But that wasn't what had gone down. With that trick memory of his, Bunnish had somehow outplayed Vesselere in an obscure variation of the Sicilian. He was swarming all over him. An incredible attack. The position was as complicated as anything I'd ever seen, very sharp and tactical. Vesselere was counterattacking on the queenside, and he had some pressure, but nothing like the threats Bunnish had on the kingside. It was a won game. We were all sure of that."

"So you almost won the championship?"

"No," Peter said. "No, it wasn't that. If we'd won the match, we would have tied Chicago and a few other teams at 6-2, but the championship would have gone to someone else, some team with 6½ match points. Berkeley maybe, or Mass. It was just the upset itself we wanted. It would have been incredible. They were the best college chess team in the country. We weren't even the best at our school. If we had beaten them, it would have caused a sensation. And we came so close."

"What happened?"

"Bunnish blew it," Peter said sourly. "There was a critical position. Bunnish had a sac. A sacrifice, you know? A double piece sac. Very sharp, but it would have busted up Vesselere's kingside and driven his king out into the open. But Bunnish was too timid for that. Instead he kept looking at Vesselere's queenside attack, and finally he made some feeble defensive move. Vesselere shifted another piece to the queenside, and Bunnish defended again. Instead of following up his advantage, he made a whole series of cautious little adjustments to the position, and before long his attack had dissipated. After that, of course, Vesselere overwhelmed him." Even now, after ten years, Peter felt the disappointment building inside him as he spoke. "We lost the match 2½-1½, and Chicago won another national championship. Afterwards, even Vesselere admitted that he was busted if Bruce had played knight takes pawn at the critical point. *Damn.*"

"You lost. That's what this amounts to. You lost."

"We came close."

"Close only counts in horseshoes and grenades," Kathy said. "You lost. Even then you were a loser, dear. I wish I'd known."

"Bunnish lost, damn it," Peter said. "It was just like him. He had a Class A rating, and that trick memory, but as a team player he was worthless. You don't know how many matches he blew for us. When the pressure was on, we could always count on Bunnish to fold. But that time

was the worst, that game against Vesselere. I could have killed him. He was an arrogant asshole, too."

Kathy laughed. "Isn't this arrogant asshole the one we are now speeding to visit?"

"It's been ten years. Maybe he's changed. Even if he hasn't, well, he's a multimillionaire asshole now. Electronics. Besides, I want to see E.C. and Steve again, and Bunnish said they'd be there."

"Delightful," said Kathy. "Well, rush on, then. I wouldn't want to miss this. It might be my only opportunity to spend four days with an asshole millionaire and three losers."

Peter said nothing, but he pressed down on the accelerator, and the Toyota plunged down the mountain road, faster and faster, rattling as it picked up speed. Down and down, he thought, down and down. Just like my goddamned life.

FOUR MILES up Bunnish's private road, they finally came within sight of the house. Peter, who still dreamed of buying his own house after a decade of living in cheap apartments, took one look and knew he was gazing at a three million dollar piece of property. There were three levels, all blending in to the mountainside so well you hardly noticed them, built of natural wood and native stone and tinted glass. A huge solar greenhouse was the most conspicuous feature. Beneath the house, a four-car garage was sunk right into the mountain itself.

Peter pulled into the last empty spot, between a brand new silver Cadillac Seville that was obviously Bunnish's, and an ancient rusted VW Beetle that was obviously not. As he pulled the key from the ignition, the garage doors shut automatically behind them, blocking out daylight and the gorgeous mountain vistas. The door closed with a resounding metallic clang.

"Someone knows we're here," Kathy observed.

"Get the suitcases," Peter snapped.

To the rear of the garage they found the elevator, and Peter jabbed the topmost of

the two buttons. When the elevator doors opened again, it was on a huge living room. Peter stepped out and stared at a wilderness of potted plants beneath a vaulting skylight, at thick brown carpets, fine wood panelling, bookcases packed with leather-bound volumes, a large fireplace, and Edward Colin Stuart, who rose from a leather-clad armchair across the room when the elevator arrived.

"E.C.," Peter said, setting down his suitcase. He smiled.

"Hello, Peter," E.C. said, coming toward them quickly. They shook hands.

"You haven't changed a goddamned bit in ten years," Peter said. It was true. E.C. was still slender and compact, with a bushy head of sandy blond hair and a magnificent handlebar mustache. He was wearing jeans and a tapered purple shirt, with a black vest, and he seemed just as he had a decade ago: brisk, trim, efficient. "Not a damn bit," Peter repeated.

"More's the pity," E.C. said. "One is supposed to change, I believe." His blue eyes were as unreadable as ever. He turned to Kathy, and said, "I'm E.C. Stuart."

"Oh, pardon," Peter said. "This is my wife, Kathy."

"Delighted," she said, taking his hand and smiling at him.

"Where's Steve?" Peter asked. "I saw his VW down in the garage. Gave me a start. How long has he been driving that thing now? Fifteen years?"

"Not quite," E.C. said. "He's around somewhere, probably having a drink." His mouth shifted subtly when he said it, telling Peter a good deal more than his words did.

"And Bunnish?"

"Bruce has not yet made his appearance. I think he was waiting for you to arrive. You probably want to settle in to your rooms."

"How do we find them, if our host is missing?" Kathy asked dryly.

"Ah," said E.C., "you haven't been acquainted with the wonders of Bunnishland yet. Look." He pointed to the fireplace.

Peter would have sworn that there had been a painting above the mantle when

they had entered, some sort of surreal landscape. Now there was a large rectangular screen, with the words on it, vivid red against black. WELCOME, PETER. WELCOME, KATHY. YOUR SUITE IS ON THE SECOND LEVEL, FIRST DOOR. PLEASE MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE."

Peter turned. "How . . . ?"

"No doubt triggered by the elevator," E.C. said. "I was greeted the same way. Bruce is an electronics genius, remember. The house is full of gadgets and toys. I've explored a bit." He shrugged. "Why don't you two unpack and then wander back? I won't go anywhere."

They found their rooms easily enough. The huge, tiled bath featured an outside patio with a hot tub, and the suite had its own sitting room and fireplace. Above it was an abstract painting, but when Kathy closed the room door it faded away and was replaced by another message: I HOPE YOU FIND THIS SATISFACTORY.

"Cute guy, this host of ours," Kathy said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Those TV screens or whatever they are better not be two-way. I don't intend to put on any show for any electronic voyeur."

Peter frowned. "Wouldn't be surprised if the house was bugged. Bunnish always was a strange sort."

"How strange?"

"He was hard to like," Peter said. "Boastful, always bragging about how good he was as a chessplayer, how smart he was, that sort of thing. No one really believed him: His grades were good, I guess, but the rest of the time he seemed close to dense. E.C. has a wicked way with hoaxes and practical jokes, and Bunnish was his favorite victim. I don't know how many laughs we had at his expense. Bunnish was kind of a goon in person, too. Pudgy, round-faced with big cheeks like some kind of chipmunk, wore his hair in a crew cut. He was in ROTC. I've never seen anyone who looked more ridiculous in a uniform. He never dated."

"Gay?"

"No, not hardly. Asexual is closer to it." Peter looked around the room and shook his head. "I can't imagine how Bunnish

made it this big. Him of all people." He sighed, opened his suitcase, and started to unpack. "I might have believed it of Delmario," he continued. "Steve and Bunnish were both in Tech, but Steve always seemed much brighter. We all thought he was a real whiz kid. Bunnish just seemed like an arrogant mediocrity."

"Fooled you," Kathy said. She smiled sweetly. "Of course, he's not the only one to fool you, is he? Though perhaps he was the first."

"Enough," Peter said, hanging the last of his shirts in the closet. "Come on, let's get back downstairs. I want to talk to E.C."

They had no sooner stepped out of their suite when a voice hailed them. "Pete?"

Peter turned, and the big man standing in the doorway down the hall smiled a blurry smile at him. "Don't you recognize me, Pete?"

"Steve?" Peter said wonderingly.

"Sure, hey, who'd you think?" He stepped out of his own room, a bit unsteadily, and closed the door behind him. "This must be the wife, eh? Am I right?"

"Yes," Peter said, "Kathy, this is Steve Delmario. Steve, Kathy." Delmario came over and pumped her hand enthusiastically, after clapping Peter roundly on the back. Peter found himself staring. If E.C. had scarcely changed at all in the past ten years, Steve had made up for it. Peter would never have recognized his old teammate on the street.

The old Steve Delmario had lived for chess and electronics. He was a fierce competitor, and he loved to tinker things together, but he was frustratingly uninterested in anything outside his narrow passions. He had been a tall, gaunt youth with incredibly intense eyes held captive behind coke-bottle lenses in heavy black frames. His black hair had always been either ruffled and unkempt or — when he treated himself to one of his do-it-yourself haircuts — grotesquely butchered. He was equally careless about his clothing, most of which was Salvation Army chic minus the chic: baggy brown pants with cuffs, ten-year-old shirts with frayed collars, a zippered and shapeless

grey sweater he wore everywhere. Once E.C. had observed that Steve Delmario looked like the last man left alive on earth after a nuclear holocaust, and for almost a semester thereafter the whole club had called Delmario, "the last man on earth." He took it with good humor. For all his quirks, Delmario had been well-liked.

The years had been cruel to him, however. The coke-bottle glasses in the black frames were the same, and the clothes were equally hap-hazard — shabby brown cords, a short-sleeved white shirt with three felt-tip pens in the pocket, a faded sweater-vest with every button buttoned, scuffed hush puppies — but the rest had all changed. Steve had gained about fifty pounds, and he had a bloated, puffy look about him. He was almost entirely bald, nothing left of the wild black hair but a few sickly strands around his ears. And his eyes had lost their feverish intensity, and were filled instead with a fuzziness that Peter found terribly disturbing. Most shocking of all was the smell of alcohol on his breath. E.C. had hinted at it, but Peter still found it difficult to accept. In college, Steve Delmario had never touched anything but an infrequent beer.

"It is good to see you again," Peter said, though he was no longer quite sure that was true. "Shall we go on downstairs? E.C. is waiting."

Delmario nodded. "Sure, sure, let's do it." He clapped Peter on the back again. "Have you seen Bunnish yet? Damn, this is some place he's got, isn't it? You seen those message screens? Clever, real clever. Never would have figured Bunnish to go as far as this, not our old Funny Bunnish, eh?" He chuckled. "I've looked at some of his patents over the years, you know. Real ingenious. Real fine work. And from Bunnish. I guess you just never know, do you?"

The living room was awash with classical music when they descended the spiral stair. Peter didn't recognize the composition; his own tastes had always run to rock. But classical music had been one of E.C.'s passions, and he was sitting in an unsound now, his eyes closed,

listening.

"Drinks," Delmario was saying. "I'll fix us all some drinks. You folks must be thirsty. Bunny's got a wet bar right behind the stair here. What do you want?"

"What are the choices?" Kathy asked. "Hell, he's got anything you could think of," said Delmario.

"A Beefeater martini, then," she said. "Very dry."

Delmario nodded. "Pete?"

"Oh," said Peter. He shrugged. "A beer, I guess."

Delmario went behind the stair to fix up their drinks, and Kathy arched her eyebrows at him. "Such refined tastes," she said. "A beer!"

Peter ignored her and went over to sit beside E.C. Stuart. "How the hell did you find the stereo?" he asked. "I don't see it anywhere." The music seemed to be coming right out of the walls.

E.C. opened his eyes, gave a quirkish little smile, and brushed one end of his mustache with a finger. "The message screen blabbed the secret to me," he said.

"The controls are built in to the wall back over there," nodding, "and the whole system is concealed. It's voice activated, too. Computerized. I told it what album I wanted to hear."

"Impressive," Peter admitted. He scratched his head. "Didn't Steve put together a voice-activated stereo back in college?"

"Your beer," Delmario said. He was standing over them, holding out a cold bottle of Heineken. Peter took it, and Delmario — with a drink in hand — seated himself on the ornate tiled coffee table. "I had a system," he said. "Real crude, though. Remember, you guys used to kid me about it."

"You bought a good cartridge, as I recall," E.C. said, "but you had it held by a tone-arm you made out of a bent coathanger."

"It worked," Delmario protested. "It was voice-activated too, like you said, but real primitive. Just on and off, that's all, and you had to speak real loud. I figured I could improve on it after I got out of school, but I never did." He shrugged.

"Nothing like this. This is real sophisticated."

"I've noticed," E.C. said. He craned up his head slightly and said, in a very loud clear voice, "I've had enough music now, thank you." The silence that followed was briefly startling. Peter couldn't think of a thing to say.

Finally E.C. turned to him and said, all seriously, "How did Bunnish get you here, Peter?"

Peter was puzzled. "Get me here? He just invited us. What do you mean?"

"He paid Steve's way, you know," E.C. said. "As for me, I turned down this invitation. Bruce was never one of my favorite people, you know that. He pulled strings to change my mind. I'm with an ad agency in New York. He dangled a big account in front of them, and I was told to come here or lose my job. Interesting, eh?"

Kathy had been sitting on the sofa, sipping her martini and looking bored. "It sounds as though this reunion is important to him," she observed.

E.C. stood up. "Come here," he said. "I want to show you something." The rest of them rose obediently, and followed him across the room. In a shadowy corner surrounded by bookcases, a chessboard had been set up, with a game in progress. The board was made of squares of light and dark wood, painstakingly inlaid into a gorgeous Victorian table. The pieces were ivory and onyx. "Take a look at that," E.C. said.

"That's a beautiful set," Peter said, admiringly. He reached down to lift the Black queen for a closer inspection, and grunted in surprise. The piece wouldn't move.

"Tug away," E.C. said. "It won't do you any good. I've tried. The pieces are glued into position. Every one of them."

Steve Delmario moved around the board, his eyes blinking behind his thick glasses. He set his drink on the table and sank into the chair behind the White pieces. "The position," he said, his voice a bit blurry with drink. "I know it."

E.C. Stuart smiled thinly and brushed his mustache. "Peter," he said, nodding toward the chessboard. "Take a good

look."

Peter stared, and all of a sudden it came clear to him, the position on the board became as familiar as his own features in a mirror. "The game," he said. "From the nationals. This is the critical position from Bunnish's game with Vesselere."

E.C. nodded. "I thought so. I wasn't sure."

"Oh, I'm sure," Delmario said loudly. "How the hell could I not be sure? This is right where Bunny blew it, remember? He played king to knight one, instead of the sac. Cost us the match. Me, I was sitting next to him, playing the best damned game of chess I ever played. Beat a Master, an what good did it do? Not a damn bit of good, thanks to Bunnish." He looked at the board and glowered. "Knight takes pawn, that's all he's got to play, busts Vesselere wide open. Check, check, check, check, got to be a mate there somewhere."

"You were never able to find it, though, Delmario," Bruce Bunnish said from behind them.

None of them had heard him enter. Peter started like a burglar surprised while copping the family silver.

Their host stood in the doorway a few yards distant. Bunnish had changed, too. He had lost weight since college, and his body looked hard and fit now, though he still had the big round cheeks that Peter remembered. His crew cut had grown out into a healthy head of brown hair, carefully styled and blow-dried. He wore large, tinted glasses and expensive clothes. But he was still Bunnish. His voice was loud and grating, just as Peter remembered it.

Bunnish strolled over to the chessboard almost casually. "You analyzed that position for weeks afterward, Delmario," he said. "You never found the mate."

Delmario stood up. "I found a dozen mates," he said.

"Yes," Bunnish said, "but none of them were forced. Vesselere was a Master. He wouldn't have played into any of your so-called mating lines."

Delmario frowned and took a drink. He was going to say something else — Peter could see him fumbling for the words —

but E.C. stood up and took away his chance. "Bruce," he said, holding out his hand. "Good to see you again. How long has it been?"

Bunnish turned and smiled superciliously. "Is that another of your jokes, E.C.? You know how long it has been, and I know how long it has been, so why do you ask? Norton know, and Delmario knows. Maybe you're asking for Mrs. Norton." He looked at Kathy. "Do you know how long it has been?"

She laughed. "I've heard." "Ah," said Bunnish. He swung back to face E.C. "Then we all know, so it must be another of your jokes, and I'm not going to answer. Do you remember how you used to phone me at three in the morning, and ask me what time it was? Then I'd tell you, and you'd ask me what I was doing calling you at that hour?"

E.C. Frowned and lowered his hand. "Well," said Bunnish, into the awkward silence that followed, "no sense standing here around this stupid chessboard. Why don't we all go sit down by the fireplace, and talk." He gestured. "Please."

But when they were seated, the silence fell again. Peter took a swallow of beer and realized that he was more than just ill-at-ease. A palpable tension hung in the air. "Nice place you've got here, Bruce," he said, hoping to lighten the atmosphere.

Bunnish looked around smugly. "I know," he said. "I've done awfully well, you know. Awfully well. You wouldn't believe how much money I have. I hardly know what to do with it all." He smiled broadly and fatuously. "And how about you, my friends? Here I am boasting once again, when I ought to be listening to all of you recount your own triumphs." Bunnish looked at Peter. "You first, Norton. You're the captain, after all. How have you done?"

"All right," Peter said, uncomfortably. "I've done fine. I own a bookstore."

"A bookstore! How wonderful! I recall that you always wanted to be in publishing, though I rather thought you'd be writing books instead of selling them. Whatever happened to those novels you were going to write, Peter? Your literary career?"

Peter's mouth was dry. "I . . . things

change, Bruce. I haven't had much time for writing." It sounded so feeble, Peter thought. All at once, he was desperately wishing he was elsewhere.

"No time for writing," echoed Bunnish. "A pity, Norton. You had such promise." "He's still promising," Kathy put in sharply. "You ought to hear him promise. He's been promising as long as I've known him. He never writes, but he does promise."

Bunnish laughed. "Your wife is very witty," he said to Peter. "She's almost as funny as E.C. was, back in college. You must enjoy being married to her a great deal. I recall how fond you were of E.C.'s little jokes." He looked at E.C. "Are you still a funny man, Stuart?"

E.C. looked annoyed. "I'm hysterical," he said in a flat voice.

"Good," said Bunnish. He turned to Kathy and said, "I don't know if Peter has told you all the stories about old E.C., but he really played some amazing pranks. Hilarious man, that's our E.C. Stuart. Once, when our chess team had won the city championship, he had a girlfriend of his call up Peter and pretend to be an AP reporter. She interviewed him for an hour before he caught on."

Kathy laughed. "Peter is sometimes a bit slow," she said.

"Oh, that was nothing. Normally I was the one E.C. liked to play tricks on. I didn't go out much, you know. Deathly afraid of girls. But E.C. had a hundred girlfriends, all of them gorgeous. One time he took pity on me and offered to fix me up on a blind date. I accepted eagerly, and when the girl arrived on the corner where we were to meet, she was wearing dark glasses and carrying a cane. Tapping. You know."

Steve Delmario guffawed, tried to stifle his laughter, and nearly choked on his drink. "Sorry," he wheezed, "sorry."

Bunnish waved casually. "Oh, go right ahead, laugh. It was funny. The girl wasn't really blind, you know, she was a drama student who was rehearsing a part in a play. But it took me all night to find that out. I was such a fool. And that was only one joke. There were hundreds of others."

E.C. looked somber. "That was a long

time ago. We were kids. It's all behind us now, Bruce."

"Bruce?" Bunnish sounded surprised. "Why, Stuart, that's the first time you've ever called me Bruce. You have changed. You were the one who started calling me Bruce. God, how I hated that name! Bruce, Bruce, Bruce, I loathed it. How many times did I ask you to call me Bruce? How many times? Why, I don't recall. I do recall, though, that after three years you finally came up to me at one meeting and said that you'd thought it over, and now you agreed that I was right, that Bruce was not an appropriate name for a Class A chessplayer, a twenty-year-old, an officer in ROTC. Your exact words. I remember the whole speech, E.C. It took me so by surprise that I didn't know what to say, so I said, 'Good, it's about time!' And then you grinned, and said that Bruce was out, that you'd never call me Bruce again. From now on, you said, you'd call me *Bunny*."

Kathy laughed, and Delmario choked down an explosive outburst, but Peter only felt cold all over. Bunnish's smile was genial enough, but his tone was pure ice venom as he recounted the incident. E.C. did not look amused either. Peter took a swallow of his beer, casting about for some ploy to get the conversation onto a different track. "Do any of you still play?" he heard himself blurt out.

They all looked at him. Delmario seemed almost befuddled. "Play?" he said. He blinked down at his empty glass.

"Help yourself to a refill," Bunnish told him. "You know where it is." He smiled at Peter as Delmario moved off to the bar. "You mean chess, of course."

"Chess," Peter said. "You remember chess. Odd little pastime played with black and white pieces and lots of two-faced clocks." He looked around. "Don't tell me we've all given it up?"

E.C. shrugged. "I'm too busy. I haven't played a rated game since college."

Delmario had returned, ice cubes clinking softly in a tumbler full of bourbon. "I played a little after college," he said, "but not for the last five years." He sat down heavily, and stared into the cold fireplace. "Those were my bad years. Wife left me, I

lost a couple jobs. Bunny here was way ahead of me. Every goddamn idea I came up with, he had a patent on it already. Got so I was useless. That was when I started to drink." I smiled, and took a sip. "Yeah," he said. "Just then. And I stopped playing chess. It all comes out, you know, it all comes out over the board. I was losing, losing lots. To all these fish, god, I tell you, I couldn't take it. Rating went down to Class B." Delmario took another drink, and looked at Peter. "You need something to play good chess, you know what I'm saying? A kind of . . . hell, I don't know . . . a kind of arrogance. Self-confidence. It's all wrapped up with ego, that kind of stuff, and I didn't have it any more, whatever it was. I used to have it, but I lost it all, I had bad luck, and I looked around one day and it was gone, and my chess was gone with it. So I quit." He lifted the tumbler to his lips, hesitated, and drained it all. Then he smiled for them. "Quit," he repeated. "Gave it up. Chucked it away. Bailed out." He chuckled, and stood up, and went off to the bar again.

"I play," Bunnish said forcefully. "I'm a Master now."

Delmario stopped in midstride, and fixed Bunnish with such a look of total loathing that it could have killed. Peter saw that Steve's hand was shaking.

"I'm very happy for you, Bruce," E.C. Stuart said. "Please do enjoy your Mastership, and your money, and Bunnishland." He stood and straightened his vest, frowning. "Meanwhile, I'm going to be going."

"Going?" said Bunnish. "Really, E.C., so soon? Must you?"

"Bunnish," E.C. said, "you can spend the next four days playing your little ego games with Steve and Peter, if you like, but I'm afraid I am not amused. You always were a pimple-brain, and I have better things to do with my life than sit here and watch you squeeze out ten-year-old pus. Am I making myself clear?"

"Oh, perfectly," Bunnish said. "Good," said E.C. He looked at the others. "Kathy, it was nice meeting you. I'm sorry it wasn't under better circumstances. Peter, Steve, if either of

you comes to New York in the near future, I hope you'll look me up. I'm in the book."

"E.C., don't you . . ." Peter began, but he knew it was useless. Even in the old days, E.C. Stuart was headstrong. You could never talk him into or out of anything.

"Goodbye," he said, interrupting Peter. He went briskly to the elevator, and they watched the wood-paneled doors close on him.

"He'll be back," Bunnish said after the elevator had gone.

"I don't think so," Peter replied.

Bunnish got up, smiling broadly. Deep dimples appeared in his large, round cheeks. "Oh, but he will, Norton. You see, it's my turn to play the little jokes now, and E.C. will soon find that out."

"What?" Delmario said.

"Don't you fret about it, you'll understand soon enough," Bunnish said. "Meanwhile, please do excuse me. I have to see about dinner. You all must be ravenous. I'm making dinner myself, you know. I sent my servants away, so we could have a nice private reunion." He looked at his watch, a heavy gold Swiss. "Let's all meet in the dining room in, say, an hour. Everything should be ready by then. We can talk some more. About life. About chess." He smiled, and left.

Kathy was smiling too. "Well," she said to Peter after Bunnish had left the room, "this is all vastly more entertaining than I would have imagined. I feel as if I just walked into a Harold Pinter play."

"Who's that?" Delmario asked, resuming his seat.

Peter ignored him. "I don't like any of this," he said. "What the hell did Bunnish mean about playing a joke on us?"

He didn't have to wait long for an answer. While Kathy went to fix herself another martini, they heard the elevator again, and turned expectantly toward the doors. E.C. stepped out frowning. "Where is he?" he said in a hard voice.

"He went to cook dinner," Peter said. "What is it? He said something about a joke . . ."

"Those garage doors won't open," E.C. said. "I can't get my car out. There's no

place to go without it. We must be fifty miles from the nearest civilization."

"I'll go down and ram out with my VW," Delmario said helpfully. "Like in the movies."

"Don't be absurd," E.C. said. "That door is stainless steel. There's no way you're going to batter it down." He scowled and brushed back one end of his mustache. "Battering down Brucie, however, is a much more viable proposition. Where the hell is the kitchen?"

Peter sighed. "I wouldn't if I were you, E.C.," he said. "From the way he's been acting, he'd just love a chance to clap you in jail. If you touch him, it's assault, you know that."

"Phone the police," Kathy suggested.

Peter looked around. "Now that you mention it, I don't see a phone anywhere in this room. Do you?" Silence. "There was no phone in our suite, either, that I recall."

"Hey!" Delmario said. "That's right, Pete, you're right."

E.C. sat down. "He appears to have us checkmated," he said.

"The exact word," said Peter. "Bunnish is playing some kind of game with us. He said so himself. A joke."

"Ha ha," said E.C. "What do you suggest we do, then? Laugh?"

Peter shrugged. "Eat dinner, talk, have our reunion, find out what the hell Bunnish wants with us."

"Win the game, guys, that's what we do," Delmario said.

E.C. stared at him. "What the hell does that mean?"

Delmario sipped his bourbon and grinned. "Peter said Bunny was playing some kind of game with us, right? OK, fine. Let's play. Let's beat him at this goddamned game, whatever the hell it is." He chuckled. "Hell, guys, this is the Funny Bunny we're playing. Maybe he is a Master, I don't give a good goddamn, he'll still find a way to blow it in the end. You know how it was. Bunnish always lost the big games. He'll lose this one, too."

"I wonder," said Peter. "I wonder."

PETER BROUGHT another bottle of Heineken back to the suite with him, and

sat in a deck chair on the patio drinking it while Kathy tried out the hot tub.

"This is nice," she said from the tub. "Relaxing. Sensuous, even. Why don't you come on in?"

"No, thanks," Peter said.

"We ought to get one of these."

"Right. We could put it in our living room. The people in the apartment downstairs would love it." He took a swallow of beer and shook his head.

"What are you thinking about?" Kathy asked.

Peter smiled grimly. "Chess, believe it or not."

"Oh? Do tell."

"Life is a lot like chess," he said.

She laughed. "Really? I'd never noticed, somehow."

Peter refused to let her needling get to him. "All a matter of choices. Every move you face choices, and every choice leads to different variations. It branches and then branches again, and sometimes the variation you pick isn't as good as it looked, isn't sound at all. But you don't know that until your game is over."

"I hope you'll repeat this when I'm out of the tub," Kathy said. "I want to write it all down for posterity."

"I remember, back in college, how many possibilities life seemed to hold. Variations. I knew, of course, that I'd only live one of my fantasy lives, but for a few years there, I had them all, all the branches, all the variations. One day I could dream of being a novelist, one day I would be a journalist covering Washington, the next — oh, I don't know, a politician, a teacher, whatever. My dream lives. Full of dream wealth and dream women. All the things I was going to do, all the places I was going to live. They were mutually exclusive, of course, but since I didn't have any of them, in a sense I had them all. Like when you sit down at a chessboard to begin a game, and you don't know what the opening will be. Maybe it will be a Sicilian, or a French, or a Ruy Lopez. They all co-exist, all the variations, until you start making the moves. You always dream of winning, no matter what line you choose, but the variations are still

different." He drank some more beer. "Once the game begins, the possibilities narrow and narrow and narrow, the other variations fade, and you're left with what you've got — a position half of your own making, and half chance, as embodied by that stranger across the board. Maybe you've got a good game, or maybe you're in trouble, but in any case there's just that one position to work from. The might-have-beens are gone."

Kathy climbed out of the hot tub and began towelling herself off. Steam rose from the water, and moved gently around her. Peter found himself looking at her almost with tenderness, something he had not felt in a long time. Then she spoke, and ruined it. "You missed your calling," she said, rubbing briskly with the towel. "You should have taken up poster-writing. You have a knack for poster profundity. You know, like, *I am not in this world to live up to your expect* —"

"Enough," Peter said. "How much blood do you have to draw, damn it?"

Kathy stopped and looked at him. She frowned. "You're really down, aren't you?" she said.

Peter stared off at the mountains, and did not bother to reply.

The concern left her voice as quickly as it had come. "Another depression, huh? Drink another beer, why don't you? Feel sorry for yourself some more. By midnight you'll have worked yourself up to a good crying jag. Go on."

"I keep thinking of that match," Peter said.

"Match?"

"In 'the nationals,'" he said. "Against Chicago. It's weird, but I keep having this funny feeling, like . . . like it was right there that it all started to go bad. We had a chance to do something big, something special. But it slipped away from us, and nothing has been right since. A losing variation, Kathy. We picked a losing variation, and we've been losing ever since. All of us."

Kathy sat down on the edge of the tub. "All of you?"

Peter nodded. "Look at us. I failed as a novelist, failed as a journalist, and now I've

got a failing bookstore. Not to mention a bitch wife. Steve is a drunk who couldn't even get together enough money to pay his way out here. E.C. is an aging account executive with an indifferent track record, going nowhere. Losers. You said it, in the car."

She smiled. "Ah, but what about our host? Bunnish lost bigger than any of you, and he seems to have won everything since."

"Hmhmhm," said Peter. He sipped thoughtfully at his beer. "I wonder. Oh, he's rich enough, I'll give you that. But he's got a chessboard in his living room with the pieces glued into position, so he can stare every day at the place he went wrong in a game played ten years ago. That doesn't sound like a winner to me."

She stood up, and shook loose her hair. It was long and auburn and it fell around her shoulders gorgeously, and Peter remembered the sweet lady he had married eight years ago, when he was a bright young writer working hard on his first novel. He smiled. "You look nice," he said.

Kathy seemed startled. "You are feeling morose," she said. "Are you sure you don't have a fever?"

"No fever. Just a memory, and a lot of regrets."

"Ah," she said. She walked back toward their bedroom, and snapped the towel at him in passing. "C'mon, captain. Your team is going to be waiting, and all this heavy philosophy has given me quite an appetite."

THE FOOD WAS fine, but the dinner was awful.

They ate thick slabs of rare prime rib, with big baked potatoes and lots of fresh vegetables. The wine looked expensive and tasted wonderful. Afterwards, they had their choice of three desserts, plus fresh-ground coffee and several delicious liquors. Yet the meal was strained and unpleasant, Peter thought. Steve Delmario was in pretty bad shape even before he came to the table, and while he was there he drank wine as if it were water, getting louder and fuzzier in the process.

E.C. Stuart was coldly quiet, his fury barely held in check behind an icy, aloof demeanor. And Bunnish thwarted every one of Peter's attempts to move conversation to safe neutral ground. His genial expansiveness was a poor mask for gloating, and he insisted on opening old wounds from their college years. Every time Peter recounted an anecdote that was amusing or harmless, Bunnish smiled and countered with one that stank of hurt and rejection.

"You never did like stories, E.C.," Bunnish said. "Know why? Because when someone tells a story, they become the center of attention. And you always needed to be the center of attention, wherever you were. Now you're not the center of anything, though. How does it feel to be insignificant?"

E.C. gave a disgusted shake of his head and poured himself more coffee. "Go on, Bunnish," he said. "Tell your story. You have a captive audience."

"I do, don't I?" Bunnish smiled. "All right. It all begins with that game. Me and Vesselere. I did not blow that game. It was never won."

Delmario made a rude noise.

"I know," Bunnish continued, unperturbed, "now, but I did not know then. I thought that you were right. I'd thrown it all away, I thought. I ate at me. For years and years, more years than you would believe. Every night I went to sleep replaying that game in my head. That game blighted my entire life. It became an obsession. I wanted only one thing — another chance. I wanted to go back, somehow, to choose another line, to make different moves, to come out a winner. I'd picked the wrong variation, that was all. I knew that if I had another chance, I'd do better. For more than fifty years, I worked toward that end, and that end alone."

Peter swallowed a mouthful of cold coffee hastily and said, "What? Fifty years? You mean five, don't you?"

"Fifty," Bunnish repeated.

"You are insane," said E.C.

"No," said Bunnish. "I am a genius. Have you ever heard of time travel, any of you?"

"It doesn't exist," said Peter. "The paradoxes..."

Bunnish waved him quiet. "You're right and you're wrong, Norton. It exists, but only in a sort of limited fashion. Yet that is enough. I won't bore you with mathematics none of you can understand. Analogy is easier. Time is said to be the fourth dimension, but it differs from the other three in one conspicuous way — our consciousness moves along it. From past to present only, alas. Time itself does not flow, no more than, say, width can flow. Our minds flicker from one instant of time to the next. This analogy was my starting point. I reasoned that if consciousness can move in one direction, it can move in the other direction as well. It took me fifty years to work out the details, however, and make what I call a *flashback* possible.

"That was in my first life, gentlemen, a life of failure and ridicule and poverty. I tended my obsession and did what I had to do so as to keep myself fed. And I hated you, each of you, for every moment of those fifty years. My bitterness was inflamed as I watched each of you succeed, while I struggled and failed. I met Norton once, twenty years after college, at an autographing party. You were so patronizing. It was then that I determined to ruin you, all of you.

"And I did. What is there to say? I perfected my device at the age of seventy-one. There is no way to move matter through time, but *mind*, mind is a different issue. My device would send my mind back to any point in my own lifetime that I chose, superimpose my consciousness with all of its memories on the consciousness of my earlier self. I could take nothing with me, of course." Bunnish smiled and tapped his temple significantly. "But I still had my photographic memory. It was more than enough. I memorized things I would need to know in my new life, and I flashed back to my youth. I was given another chance, a chance to make some different moves in the game of life. I did."

Steve Delmario blinked. "Your body," he said blurrily. "What happened to your body, huh?"

"An interesting question. The kick of

the flashback kills the would-be time-traveler. The body, that is. The timeline itself goes on, however. At least my equations indicate that it should. I've never been around to witness it. Meanwhile, changes in the past create a new, variant timeline."

"Oh, alternate tracks," Delmario said. He nodded. "Yeah."

Kathy laughed. "I can't believe I'm sitting here listening to all this," she said. "And that he —" she pointed to Delmario — "is taking it seriously."

E.C. Stuart had been looking idly at the ceiling, with a disdainful, faintly tolerant smile on his face. Now he straightened. "I agree," he said to Kathy. "I am not so glib as you were, Bruce," he told Bunnish, "and if you are trying to get some laughs by having us swallow this crock of shit, it isn't going to work."

Bunnish turned to Peter. "Captain, what's your vote?"

"Well," said Peter carefully, "all this is a little hard to credit, Bruce. You spoke of the game becoming an obsession with you, and I think that's true. I think you ought to be talking to a professional about this, not to us."

"A professional what?" Bunnish said. Peter fidgeted uncomfortably. "You know. A shrink or a counselor."

Bunnish chuckled. "Failure hasn't made you any less patronizing," he said. "You were just as bad in the bookstore, in that line where you turned out to be a successful novelist."

Peter sighed. "Bruce, can't you see how pathetic these delusions of yours are? I mean, you've obviously been quite a success, and none of us have done as well, but even that wasn't enough for you, so you've constructed all these elaborate fantasies about how you have been the one behind our various failures. Vicarious, imaginary revenge."

"Neither vicious nor imaginary, Norton," Bunnish snapped. "I can tell you exactly how I did it."

"Let him tell his stories, Peter," E.C. said. "Then maybe he'll let us out of this funny farm."

"Why thank you, E.C.," Bunnish said.

He looked around the table with smug satisfaction, like a man about to live out a dream he has cherished for a long, long time. Finally he fastened on Steve Delmario. "I'll start with you," he said, "because in fact, I did start with you. You were easy to destroy, Delmario, because you were always so limited. In the original timeline, you were as wealthy as I am in this one. While I spent my life perfecting my flashback device, you made fast fortunes in the wide world out there. Electronic games at first, later more basic stuff, home computers, that sort of thing. You were born for that, and you were the best in the business, inspired and ingenious."

"When I flashed back, I simply took your place. Before using my device, I studied all your early little games, your cleverest ideas, the basic patterns that came later and made you so rich. And I memorized all of them, along with the dates on which you'd come up with each and every one. Back in the past, armed with all this foreknowledge, it was child's play to beat you to the punch. Again and again. In those early years, Delmario, didn't it ever strike you as strange the way I anticipated every one of your small brainstorms? I'm living your life, Delmario."

Delmario's hand had begun to tremble as he listened. His face looked dead. "God damn you," he said. "God damn you."

"Don't let him get to you, Steve," E.C. put in. "He's just making this up to see us squirm. It's all too absurd for words."

"But it's true," Delmario wailed, looking from E.C. to Bunnish and then, helplessly, at Peter. Behind the thick lenses his eyes seemed wild. "Peter, what he said — all my ideas — he was always ahead of me, he, he, I told you, he —"

"Yes, Peter said firmly, "and you told Bruce too, when we were talking earlier. Now he's just using your fears against you."

Delmario opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"Have another drink," Bunnish suggested.

Delmario stared at Bunnish as if he were about to leap up and strangle him. Peter

tensed himself to intervene. But then, instead, Delmaro reached out for a half-empty wine bottle, and filled his glass sloppily.

"This is contemptible, Bruce," E.C. said.

Bunnish turned to face him. "Delmaro's ruin was easy and dramatic," he said. "You were more difficult, Stuart. He had nothing to live for but his work, you see, and when I took that away from him, he just collapsed. I only had to anticipate him a half-dozen times before all of his belief in himself was gone, and he did the rest himself. But you, E.C., you had more resources."

"Go on with the fairy tale, Bunnish," E.C. said in a put-upon tone.

"Delmaro's ideas had made me rich," Bunnish said. "I used the money against you. Your fall was less satisfying and less resounding than Delmaro's. He went from the heights to the pits. You were only a moderate success to begin with, and I had to settle for turning you into a moderate failure. But I managed. I pulled strings behind the scenes to lose you a number of large accounts. When you were with Foote, Cone I made sure another agency hired away a copywriter named Allerd, just before he came up with a campaign that would have rebounded to your credit. And remember when you left that position to take a better-paying slot at a brand new agency? Remember how quickly that agency folded, leaving you without an income? That was me. I've given your career twenty or thirty little shoves like that. Haven't you ever wondered at how infallibly wrong most of your professional moves have been, Stuart? At your bad luck?"

"No," said E.C. "I'm doing well enough, thank you."

Bunnish smiled. "I played one other little joke on you, too. You can think me for that case of herpes you picked up last year. The lady who gave it to you was well paid. I had to search for her for a good number of years until I found the right combination—an out-of-work actress who was young and gorgeous and precisely your type, yet sufficiently desperate to do just about anything, and gifted with an incurable

venerable disease as well. How did you like her, Stuart? It's your fault, you know. I just put her in your path, you did the rest yourself. And I thought it was so fitting, after my blind date and all."

E.C.'s expression did not change. "If you think this is going to break me down or make me believe you, you're way off base. All this proves is that you've had me investigated, and managed to dig up some dirt on my life."

"Oh," said Bunnish. "Always so skeptical, Stuart. Scared that if you believe, you'll wind up looking foolish. Tsk." He turned toward Peter. "And you, Norten. You. Our fearless leader. You were the most difficult of all."

Peter met Bunnish's eyes and said nothing.

"I read your novel, you know," Bunnish said casually.

"I've never published a novel."

"Oh, but you have! In the original timeline, that is. Quite a success too. The critics loved it, and it even appeared briefly on the bottom of the *Times* bestseller list."

Peter was not amused. "This is so obvious and pathetic," he said.

"It was called *Beasts in a Cage*, I believe," Bunnish said.

Peter had been sitting and listening with contempt, humoring a sick, sad man. Now, suddenly, he sat upright as if slapped.

He heard Kathy suck in her breath. "My god," she said.

E.C. seemed puzzled. "Peter? What is it? You look . . ."

"No one knows about that book," Peter said. "How the hell did you find out? My old agent, you must have gotten the title from him. Yes. That's it, isn't it?"

"No," said Bunnish, smiling complacently.

"You're lying!"

"Peter, what is it?" said E.C. "Why are you so upset?"

Peter looked at him. "My book," he said. "I . . . *Beasts in a Cage* was . . ."

"There was such a book?"

"Yes," Peter said. He swallowed nervously, feeling confused and angry. "Yes, there was. I . . . after college. My

first novel." He gave a nervous laugh. "I thought it would be the first. I had . . . had a lot of hopes. It was ambitious. A serious book, but I thought it had commercial possibilities as well. The circus. It was about the circus, you know how I was always fascinated by the circus. A metaphor for life, I thought, a kind of life, but very colorful too, and dying, a dying institution. I thought I could write the great circus novel. After college, I traveled with Ringling Brothers' Blue Show for a year, doing research. I was a butcher, I . . . that's what they call the vendors in the stands, you see. A year of research, and I took two years to write the novel. The central character was a boy who worked with the big cats. I finally finished it and sent it off to my agent, and less than three weeks after I'd gotten it into the mail, I . . . " He couldn't finish.

But E.C. understood. He frowned. "That circus bestseller? What was the title?"

"*Blue Show*," Peter said, the words bitter in his mouth. "By Donald Hastings Sullivan, some old hack who'd written fifty gothics and a dozen formula westerns, all under pen names. Such a book, from such a writer. No one could believe it. E.C., I couldn't believe it. It was my book, under a different title. Oh, it wasn't word-for-word. *Beasts in a Cage* was a lot better written. But the story, the background, the incidents, even a few of the character names . . . it was frightening. My agent never marketed my book. He said it was too much like *Blue Show* to be publishable, that no one would touch it. And even if I did get it published, he warned me, I would be labelled derivative at best, and a plagiarist at worst. It looked like a ripoff, he said. Three years of my life, and he called it a ripoff. We had words. He fired me, and I couldn't get another agent to take me on. I never wrote another book. The first one had taken too much out of me." Peter turned to Bunnish. "I destroyed my manuscript, burned every copy. No one knew about that book except my agent, me, and Kathy. How did you find out?"

"I told you," said Bunnish. "I read it."

"You damned liar!" Peter said. He scooped up a glass in a white rage, and flung it down the table at Bunnish's smiling face, wanting to obliterate that complacent grin, to see it dissolve into blood and ruin. But Bunnish ducked and the glass shattered against a wall.

"Easy, Peter," E.C. said. Delmaro was blinking in owlish stupidity, lost in an alcoholic haze. Kathy was gripping the edge of the table. Her knuckles had gone white.

"Methinks our captain doth protest too much," Bunnish said, his dimples showing. "You know I'm telling the truth, Norten, I read your novel: I can recite the whole plot to prove it." He shrugged. "In fact, I did recite the whole plot. To Donald Hastings Sullivan, who wrote *Blue Show* while in my employ. I would have done it myself, but I had no aptitude for writing. Sully was glad for the chance. He got a handsome flat fee and we split the royalties, which were considerable."

"You son of a bitch," Peter said, but he said it without force. He felt his rage ebbing away, leaving behind it only a terrible sickly feeling, the certainty of defeat. He felt cheated and helpless and, all of a sudden, he realized that he believed Bunnish, believed every word of his preposterous story. "It's true, isn't it?" he said. "It is really true. You did it to me. You. You stole my words, my dreams, all of it."

Bunnish said nothing.

"And the rest of it," Peter said, "the other failures, those were all you too, weren't they? After *Blue Show*, when I went into journalism . . . that big story that evaporated on me, all my sources suddenly denying everything or vanishing, so it looked like I'd made it all up. The assignments that evaporated, all those lawsuits, plagiarism, invasion of privacy, libel, every time I turned around I was being sued. Two years, and they just about ran me out of the profession. But it wasn't bad luck, was it? It was you. You stole my life."

"You ought to be complimented, Norten. I had to break you twice. The first time I managed to kill your literary career

with *Blue Show*, but then while my back was turned you managed to become a terribly popular journalist. Prize-winning, well known, all of it, and by then it was too late to do anything. I had to flash back once more to get you, do everything all over."

"I ought to kill you, Bunnish," Peter heard himself say.

"E.C. shook his head. "Peter," he said, in the tone of a man explaining something to a high-grade moron, "this is all an elaborate hoax. Don't take Bunny seriously."

Peter stared at his old teammate. "No, E.C. It's true. It's all true. Stop worrying about being the butt of a joke, and think about it. It makes sense. It explains everything that has happened to us."

E.C. Stuart made a disgusted noise, frowned, and fingered the end of his mustache.

"Listen to your captain, Stuart," Bunnish said.

Peter turned back to him. "Why? That's what I want to know. *Why?* Because we played jokes on you? Kidded you? Maybe we were rotten, I don't know, it didn't seem to be so terrible at the time. You brought a lot of it on yourself. But whatever we might have done to you, we never deserved this. We were your teammates, your friends."

Bunnish's smile curdled, and the dimples disappeared. "You were never my friends."

Steve Delmario nodded vigorously at that. "You're no friend of mine, Funny Bunny. I tell you that. Know what you are? A wimp. You were always a goddamn wimp, that's why nobody ever liked you, you were just a damn wimp loser with a crewcut. Hell, you think you were the only one ever got kidded? What about me, the ol' last man on earth, huh, what about that? What about the jokes E.C. played on Pete, on Les, on all the others?" He took a drink. "Bringing us here like this, that's another damn wimp thing to do. You're the same Bunny you always were. Wasn't enough to do something, you had to brag about it, let everybody know. And if somethin' went wrong, was never your

fault, was it? You only lost 'cause the room was too noisy, or the lighting was bad, whatever." Delmario stood up. "You make me sick. Well, you screwed up all our lives maybe, and now you told us about it. Good for you. You had your damn wimp fun. Now let us out of here."

"I second that motion," said E.C. "Why, I wouldn't think of it." Bunnish replied. "Not just yet. We haven't played any chess yet. A few games for old times' sake."

Delmario blinked, and moved slightly as he stood holding the back of his chair. "The game," he said, suddenly reminded of his challenge to Bunnish of a few minutes ago. "We were goin' to play over the game."

Bunnish folded his hands neatly in front of him on the table. "We can do better than that," he said. "I am a very fair man, you see. None of you ever gave me a chance, but I'll give one to you, to each of you. I've stolen your lives. Wasn't that what you shot, Norten? Well, *friends*, I'll give you a shot at winning those lives back. We'll play a little chess. We'll replay the game, from the critical position. I'll take Vesselere's side and you can have mine. The three of you can consult, if you like, or I'll play you one by one. I don't care. All you have to do is beat me. Win the game you say I should have won, and I'll let you go, and give you anything you like. Money, property, a job, whatever."

"Go t' hell, wimp," Delmario said. "I'm not interested in your damn money."

Bunnish picked up his glasses from the table and donned them, smiling widely. "Or," he said, "if you prefer, you can win a chance to use my flashback device. You can go back then, anticipate me, do it all over, live the lives you were destined to live before I dealt myself in. Just think of it. It's the best opportunity you'll ever have, any of you, and I'm making it so easy. All you have to do is win a won game."

"Winning a won game is one of the hardest things in chess," Peter said sullenly. But even as he said it, his mind was racing, excitement stirring deep in his gut. It was a chance, he thought, a chance to reshape the ruins of his life, to make it

come out right. To obliterate the wrong turnings, to taste the wine of success instead of the wormwood of failure, to avoid the mockery that his marriage to Kathy had become. Dead hopes rose like ghosts to dance again in the graveyard of his dreams. He had to take the shot, he knew. He had to.

Steve Delmario was there before him. "I can win that goddamned game," he boomed drunkenly. "I could win it with my eyes shut. You're on, Bunny. Get out a set, damn you!"

Bunnish laughed and stood up, putting his big hands flat on the tabletop and using them to push himself to his feet. "Oh no, Delmario. You're not going to have the excuse of being drunk when you lose. I'm going to crush you when you are cold stone sober. Tomorrow. I'll play you tomorrow."

Delmario blinked furiously. "Tomorrow," he echoed.

LATER, WHEN they were alone in their room, Kathy turned on him. "Peter," she said, "let's get out of here. Tonight. Now."

Peter was sitting before the fire. He had found a small chess set in the top drawer of his bedside table, and had set up the critical position from Vesselere-Bunnish to study it. He scowled at the distraction and said, "Get out? How the hell do you propose we do that, with our car locked up in that garage?"

"There's got to be a phone here somewhere. We could search, find it, call for help. Or just walk."

"It's December, and we're in the mountains miles from anywhere. We try to walk out of here and we could freeze to death. No." He turned his attention back to the chessboard and tried to concentrate.

"Peter," she said angrily. He looked up again. "What?" he snapped. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"We have to do something. This whole scene is insane. Bunnish needs to be locked up."

"He was telling the truth," Peter said. Kathy's expression softened, and for an instant there was something like sorrow

on her face. "I know," she said softly. "You know," Peter mimicked savagely. "You know, do you? Well, do you know how it feels? That bastard is going to pay. He's responsible to every rotten thing that has happened to me. For all I know, he's probably responsible for you."

Kathy's lips moved only slightly, and her eyes moved not at all, but suddenly the sorrow and sympathy were gone from her face, and instead Peter saw familiar pity, well-honed contempt. "He's just going to crush you again," she said coldly. "He wants you to lust after this chance, because he intends to deny it to you. He's going to beat you, Peter. How are you going to like that? How are you going to live with it, afterwards?"

Peter looked down at the chesspieces. "That's what he intends, yeah. But he's a moron. This is a won position. It's only a matter of finding the winning line, the right variation. And we've got three shots at it. Steve goes first. If he loses, E.C. and I will be able to learn from his mistakes. I won't lose. I've lost everything else, maybe, but not this. This time I'm going to be a winner. You'll see."

"I'll see, all right," Kathy said. "You pitiful bastard."

Peter ignored her, and moved a piece. Knight takes pawn.

KATHY REMAINED in the suite the next morning. "Go play your damn games if you like," she told Peter. "I'm going to soak in the hot tub, and read. I want no part of this."

"Suit yourself," Peter said. He slammed the door behind him, and thought once again what a bitch he'd married.

Downstairs, in the huge living room, Bunnish was setting up the board. The set he'd chosen was not ornate and expensive like the one in the corner, with its pieces glued into place. Sets like that looked good for decorative purposes, but were useless in serious play. Instead Bunnish had shifted a plain wooden table to the center of the room, and fetched out a standard tournament set: a vinyl board in green and white that he unrolled carefully, a well-

worn set of Drueke pieces of standard Staunton design, cast in black and white plastic with lead weights in the bases, beneath the felt, to give them a nice heft. He placed each piece into position from memory, without once looking at the game frozen on the expensive inlaid board across the room. Then he began to set a double-faced chess clock. "Can't play without the clock, you know," he said, smiling. "I'll set it exactly the same as it stood that day in Evanston."

When everything was finished, Bunnish surveyed the board with satisfaction and seated himself behind Veselere's Black pieces. "Ready?" he asked.

Steve Delmario sat down opposite him, looking pale and terribly hung-over. He was holding a big tumbler full of orange juice, and behind his thick glasses his eyes moved nervously. "Yeah," he said. "Go on."

Bunnish pushed the button that started Delmario's clock.

Very quickly, Delmario reached out, played knight takes pawn — the pieces clicked together softly as he made the capture — and used the pawn he'd taken to punch the clock, stopping his own timer and starting Bunnish's.

"The sac," said Bunnish. "What a surprise." He took the knight.

Delmario played bishop takes pawn, sacrificing another piece. Bunnish was forced to capture with his king. He seemed unperturbed. He was smiling faintly, his dimples faint creases in his big cheeks, his eyes clear and sharp and cheerful behind his tinted eyeglasses.

Steve Delmario was leaning forward over the board, his dark eyes sweeping back and forth over the position, back and forth, over and over again as if doublechecking that everything was really where he thought it was. He crossed and uncrossed his legs. Peter, standing just behind him, could almost feel the tension beating off Delmario in waves, twisting him. Even E.C. Stuart, seated a few feet distant in a big comfortable armchair, was staring at the game intently. The clock ticked softly. Delmario lifted his hand to move his queen, but hesitated with his

fingers poised above it. His hand trembled.

"What's the matter, Steve?" Bunnish asked. He steeped his hands just beneath his chin, and smiled when Delmario looked up at him. "You hesitate. Don't you know? He who hesitates is lost. Uncertain, all of a sudden? Surely that can't be. You were always so certain before. How many mates did you show me? How many?"

Delmario blinked, frowned. "I'm going to show you one more, Bunny," he said furiously. His fingers closed on his queen, shifted it across the board. "Check."

"Ah," said Bunnish. Peter studied the position. The double sac had cleared away the pawns in front of the Black king, and the queen check permitted no retreat. Bunnish marched his king up a square, toward the center of the board, toward the waiting White army. Surely he was lost now. His own defenders were all over on the queenside, and the enemy was all around him. But Bunnish did not seem worried.

Delmario's clock was ticking as he examined the position. He sipped his juice, shifted restlessly in his seat. Bunnish yawned, and grinned tauntingly. "You were the winner that day, Delmario. Beat a Master: The only winner. Can't you find the win now? Where are all those mates, eh?"

"There's so many I don't know which one to go with, Bunny," Steve said. "Now shut up, damn you. I'm trying to think."

"Oh," said Bunnish. "Pardon."

Delmario consumed ten minutes on his clock before he reached out and moved his remaining knight. "Check."

Bunnish advanced his king again.

Delmario licked his lips, slid his queen forward a square. "Check."

Bunnish's king went sideways, toward the safety of the queenside.

Delmario flicked a pawn forward. "Check."

Bunnish had to take. He removed the offending pawn with his king, smiling complacently.

With the file open, Delmario could bring his rooks into play. He shifted one over.

"Check."

Bunnish's harried king moved again.

Now Delmario moved the rook forward, sliding it right up the file to confront the enemy king face to face. "Check!" he said loudly.

Peter sucked in his breath sharply. Without meaning to. The rook was hanging! Bunnish could just snatch it off. He stared at the position over Delmario's shoulder. Bunnish could take the rook with his king, all right, but then the other rook came over, the king had to go back, then if the queen shifted just one square . . . yes . . . too many mate threats in that variation. Black had lots of resources, but they all ended in disaster. But if Bunnish took with his knight instead of his king, he left that square ungarded . . . hmmm . . . queen check, king up, bishop comes in . . . no, mate was even quicker that way.

Delmario drained his orange juice and set the empty tumbler down with self-satisfied firmness.

Bunnish moved his king diagonally forward. The only possible move, Peter thought. Delmario leaned forward. Behind him, Peter leaned forward too. The White pieces were swarming around Black's isolated king now, but how to tighten the mating net? Steve had three different checks, Peter thought. No, four, he could do that too. He watched and analyzed in silence. The rook check was no good, the king just retreated, and further checks simply drove him to safety. The bishop? No, Bunnish could trade off, take with his rook — he was two pieces up, after all. Several subvariations branched off from the two queen checks. Peter was still trying to figure out where they led, when Delmario reached out suddenly, grabbed a pawn from in front of his king, and moved it two squares. He slammed it down solidly, and slapped the clock. Then he sat back and crossed his arms. "Your move, Bunnish," he said.

Peter studied the board. Delmario's last move didn't give check, but the pawn advance cut off an important escape square. Now that threatened rook check was no longer innocuous. Instead of being chased back to safety, the Black king got mated in three. Of course, Bunnish had a

tempo now, it was his move, he could bring up a defender. His queen now, could . . . no, check there and mate in one, unstoppable. The longer Peter looked at the position, the fewer defensive resources he saw for Black. Bunnish could delay the loss, but he couldn't stop it. He was smashed!

Bunnish did not look smashed. Very calmly he picked up a knight and moved it to queen's knight six. "Check," he said quietly.

Delmario stared. Peter stared. E.C. Stuart got up out of his chair and drifted closer, his finger brushing back his mustache as he considered the game. The check was only a time-waster, Peter thought. Delmario could capture the knight with either of two pawns, or he could simply move his king. Except . . . Peter scowled. . . If White took with the bishop pawn, queen came up with check, king moved to the second, queen takes rook pawn with check, king . . . ro, that was no good. White got mated by force. The other way seemed to bring on the mate even faster, after the queen checked from the eighth rank.

Delmario moved his king up. Bunnish slid a bishop out along a diagonal. "Check."

There was only one move. Steve moved his king forward again. He was being harassed, but his mating net was still intact, once the checks had run their course.

Bunnish flicked his knight backward, with another check.

Delmario was blinking and twisting his legs beneath the table. Peter saw that if he brought his king back, Bunnish had a forced series of checks leading to mate . . . but the Black knight hung now, to both rook and queen, and . . . Delmario captured it with the rook.

Bunnish grabbed White's advanced pawn with his queen, removing the cornerstone of the mating net. Now Delmario could play queen takes queen, but then he lost his queen to a fork, and after the trade-offs that followed he'd be hopelessly busted. Instead he retreated his king.

Bunnish made a tsking noise and captured the White knight with his queen, again daring Delmario to take it. With knight and pawn both gone, Delmario's mating threats had all dissipated, and if White snatched that Black queen, there was a check, a pin, take, take, and . . . Peter gritted his teeth together . . . and White would suddenly be in the end-game down a piece, hopelessly lost. No. There had to be something better. The position still had a lot of play in it. Peter stared, and analyzed.

Steve Delmario stared too, while his clock ticked. The clock was one of those fancy jobs, with a move counter. It showed that he had to make seven more moves to reach time control. He had just under fifteen minutes remaining. Some time pressure, but nothing serious.

Except that Delmario sat and sat, eyes flicking back and forth across the board, blinking. He took off his thick glasses and cleaned them methodically on his shirttail. When he slid them back on, the position had not changed. He stared at the Black king fixedly, as if he were willing it to fall. Finally he started to get up. "I need a drink," he said.

"I'll get it," Peter snapped. "Sit down. You've only got eight minutes left."

"Yeah," Delmario said. He sat down again. Peter went to the bar and made him a screwdriver. Steve drained half of it in a gulp, never taking his eyes from the chessboard.

Peter happened to glance at E.C. Stuart. E.C. shook his head and cast his eyes up toward the ceiling. Not a word was spoken, but Peter heard the message: *forget it.*

Steve Delmario sat there, growing more and more agitated. With three minutes remaining on his clock, he reached out his hand, thought better of it, and pulled back. He shifted in his seat, gathered his legs up under him, leaned closer to the board, his nose a bare couple of inches above the chessmen. His clock ticked.

He was still staring at the board when Bunnish smiled and said, "Your flag is down, Delmario."

Delmario looked up, blinking. His

mouth hung open. "Time," he said urgently. "I just need time to find the win, got to be here someplace, got to, all those checks . . ."

Bunnish rose. "You're out of time, Delmario. Doesn't matter anyway. You're dead lost."

"NO! No I'm not, damn you, there's a win . . ."

Peter put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Steve, take it easy," he said. "I'm sorry. Bruce is right. You're busted here."

"No," Delmario insisted. "I know there's a winning combo, I just got to . . . got to . . . only . . ." His right hand, out over the board, began to shake, and he knocked over his own king.

Bunnish showed his dimples. "Listen to your captain, winner-boy," he said. Then he looked away from Delmario, to where E.C. stood scowling. "You're next, Stuart. Tomorrow. Same time, same place."

"And if I don't care to play?" E.C. said disdainfully.

Bunnish shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said. "I'll be here, and the game will be here. I'll start your clock on time. You can lose over the board or lose by forfeit. You lose either way."

"And me?" Peter said.

"Why, captain," said Bunnish. "I'm saving you for last."

STEVE DELMARIO was a wreck. He refused to leave the chessboard except to mix himself fresh drinks. For the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon he remained glued to his seat, drinking like a fish and flicking the chess pieces around like a man possessed, playing and replaying the game. Delmario wolfed down a couple sandwiches that Peter made up for him around lunchtime, but there was no talking to him, no calming him. Peter tried. In an hour or so, Delmario would be passed out from the booze he was downing in such alarming quantities.

Finally he and E.C. left Delmario alone, and went upstairs to his suite. Peter knocked on the door. "You decent, Kathy? E.C. is with me."

She opened the door. She had on jeans and a t-shirt. "Decent as I ever get," she

said. "Come on in. How did the great game come out?"

"Delmario lost," Peter said. "It was a close thing, though. I thought we had him for a moment."

Kathy snorted.

"So what now?" E.C. said.

"You going to play tomorrow?"

E.C. shrugged. "Might as well. I've got nothing to lose."

"Good," Peter said. "You can beat him. Steve almost won, and we both know the shape he's in. We've got to analyze, figure out where he went wrong."

E.C. fingered his mustache. He looked cogit and thoughtful. "That pawn move," he suggested. "The one that didn't give check. It left White open for that counterattack."

"It also set up the mating net," Peter said. He looked over his shoulder, saw Kathy standing with her arms crossed. "Could you get the chessboard from the bedroom?" he asked her. When she left, Peter turned back to E.C. "I think Steve was already lost by the time he made that pawn move. That was his only good shot — lots of threats there. Everything else just petered out after a few checks. He went wrong before that, I think."

"All those checks," E.C. said. "One too many, maybe?"

"Exactly," said Peter. "Instead of driving him into a checkmate, Steve drove him into safety. You've got to vary somewhere in there."

"Agreed."

Kathy arrived with the chess set and placed it on the low table between them. As Peter swiftly set up the critical position, she folded her legs beneath her and sat on the floor. But she grew bored very quickly when they began to analyze, and it wasn't long before she got to her feet again with a disgusted noise. "Both of you are crazy," she said. "I'm going to get something to eat."

"Bring us back something, will you?" Peter asked. "And a couple of beers?" But he hardly noticed it when she placed the tray beside them.

They stayed at it well into the night. Kathy was the only one who went down to

dine with Bunnish. When she returned, she said, "That man is disgusting," so emphatically that it actually distracted Peter from the game. But only for an instant.

"Here, try this," E.C. said, moving a knight, and Peter looked back quickly.

"I SEE YOU decided to play, Stuart," Bunnish said the next morning.

E.C., looking trim and fresh, his sandy hair carefully combed and brushed, a steaming mug of black coffee in hand, nodded briskly. "You're as sharp as ever, Bruce."

Bunnish chuckled.

"One point, however," E.C. said, holding up a finger. "I still don't believe your cock-and-bull story about time-travel. We'll play this out, alright, but we'll play for money, not for one of your flashbacks. Understood?"

"You jokers are such suspicious types," Bunnish said. He sighed. "Anything you say, of course. You want money. Fine."

"One million dollars."

Bunnish smiled broadly. "Small change," he said. "But I agree. Beat me, and you'll leave here with one million. You'll take a check, I hope?"

"A certified check," E.C. turned to Peter. "You are my witness," he said, and Peter nodded. The three of them were alone this morning. Kathy was firm in her disinterest, and Delmario was in his room sleeping off his binge.

"Ready?" Bunnish asked.

"Go on."

Bunnish started the clock. E.C. reached out and played the sacrifice. Knight takes pawn. His motions were crisp and economical. Bunnish captured, and E.C. played the bishop sac without a second's hesitation. Bunnish captured again, pushed the clock.

E.C. Stuart brushed back his mustache, reached down, and moved a pawn. No check.

"Ah," Bunnish said. "An improvement. You have something up your sleeve, don't you? Of course you do. E.C. Stuart always has something up his sleeve. The hilarious, unpredictable E.C. Stuart. Such a joker."

So imaginative."

"Play chess, Brucie," snapped E.C.

"Of course," Peter drifted closer to the board while Bunnish studied the position. They had gone over and over the game last night, and had finally decided that the queen check that Delmario had played following the double sac was unsound. There were several other checks in the position, all tempting, but after hours of analysis he and E.C. had discarded those as well. Each of them offered plenty of traps and checkmates should Black err, but each of them seemed to fail against correct play, and they had to assume Bunnish would play correctly.

E.C.'s pawn move was a more promising line. Subtler. Sounder. It opened lines for White's pieces, and interposed another barrier between Black's king and the safety of the queenside. Suddenly White had threats everywhere. Bunnish had serious troubles to chew on now.

He did not chew on them nearly as long as Peter would have expected. After studying the position for a bare couple minutes, he picked up his queen and snatched off White's queen rook pawn, which was undefended. Bunnish cupped the pawn in his hand, yawned, and slouched back in his chair, looking lazy and unperturbed.

E.C. Stuart permitted himself a brief scowl as he looked over the position. Peter felt uneasy as well. That move ought to have disturbed Bunnish more than it had, he thought. White had so many threats . . . last night they had analyzed the possibilities exhaustively, playing and replaying every variation and subvariation until they were sure that they had found the win. Peter had gone to sleep feeling almost jubilant. Bunnish had a dozen feasible defenses to their pawn thrust. They'd had no way of knowing which one he would choose, so they had satisfied themselves that each and every one ultimately ended in failure.

Only now Bunnish had fooled them. He hadn't played any of the likely defenses. He had just ignored E.C.'s mating threats, and gone pawn-snatching as blithely as the

rankest patzer. Had they missed something? While E.C. considered the best reply, Peter drew up a chair to the side of the board so he could analyze in comfort.

There was nothing, he thought, nothing. Bunnish had a check next move, if he wanted it, by pushing his queen to the eighth rank. But it was meaningless. E.C. hadn't weakened his queenside the way Steve had yesterday, in his haste to find a mate. If Bunnish checked, all Stuart had to do was move his king up to queen two. Then the Black queen would be under attack by a rook, and forced to retreat or grab another worthless pawn. Meanwhile Bunnish would be getting checkmated in the middle of the board. The more Peter went over the variations, the more convinced he became that there was no way Bunnish could possibly work up the kind of counterattack he had used to smash Steve Delmario.

E.C., after a long and cautious appraisal of the board, seemed to reach the same conclusion. He reached out coolly and moved his knight, hemming in Bunnish's lonely king once and for all. Now he threatened a queen check that would lead to mate in one. Bunnish could capture the dominating knight, but then E.C. just recaptured with a rook, and checkmate followed soon thereafter, no matter how Bunnish might wriggle on the hook.

Bunnish smiled across the board at his opponent, and lazily shoved his queen forward a square to the last rank. "Check," he said.

E.C. brushed back his moustache, shrugged, and played his king up. He punched the clock with a flourish. "You're lost," he said flatly.

Peter was inclined to agree. That last check had accomplished nothing; in fact, it seemed to have worsened Black's plight. The mate threats were still there, as unstoppable as ever, and now Black's queen was under attack as well. He could pull it back, of course, but not in time to help with the defense. Bunnish ought to be frantic and miserable.

Instead his smile was so broad that his fat cheeks were threatening to crack in

two. "Lost?" he said. "Ah, Stuart, this time the joke is on you!" He giggled like a teenage girl, and brought his queen down to the rank to grab off White's rook. "Check!"

Peter Norten had not played a game of tournament chess in a long, long time, but he still remembered the way it had felt when an opponent suddenly made an unexpected move that changed the whole complexion of a game: the brief initial confusion, the *what is that?* feeling, followed by panic when you realized the strength of the unanticipated move, and then the awful swelling gloom that built and built as you followed through one losing variation after another in your head. There was no worse moment in the game of chess.

That was how Peter felt now.

They had missed it totally. Bunnish was giving up his queen for a rook, normally an unthinkable sacrifice, but not in this position. E.C. had to take the offered queen. But if he captured with his king, Peter saw with sudden awful clarity, Black had a combination that won the farm, which meant he had to use the other rook, pulling it off its crucial defense of the central knight . . . and then . . . oh, shit!

E.C. tried to find another alternative for more than fifteen minutes, but there was no alternative to be found. He played rook takes queen. Bunnish quickly seized his own rook and captured the knight that had moved so menacingly into position only two moves before. With ruthless precision, Bunnish then forced the trade-off of one piece after another, simplifying every danger of the board. All of a sudden they were in the endgame. E.C. had a queen and five pawns; Bunnish had a rook, two bishops, a knight, and four pawns, and — ironically — his once-imperiled king now occupied a powerful position in the center of the board.

Play went on for hours, as E.C. gamely gave check after check with his rogue queen, fighting to pick up a loose piece or perhaps draw by repetition. But Bunnish was too skilled for such desperation tactics. It was only a matter of technique.

Finally E.C. tipped over his king.

"I thought we looked at every possible defense," Peter said numbly.

"Why, captain," said Bunnish cheerfully. "Every attempt to defend loses. The defending pieces block off escape routes or get in the way. Why should I help mate myself? I'd rather let you try to do that."

"I will do that," Peter promised angrily. "Tomorrow."

Bunnish rubbed his hands together. "I can scarcely wait!"

THAT NIGHT the post-mortem was held in E.C.'s suite; Kathy — who had greeted their glum news with an "I told you so" and a contemptuous smile — had insisted that she didn't want them staying up half the night over a chessboard in her presence. She told Peter he was behaving like a child, and they had angry words before he stormed out.

Steve Delmario was going over the morning's loss with E.C. when Peter joined them. Delmario's eyes looked awfully bloodshot, but otherwise he appeared sober, if haggard. He was drinking coffee. "How does it look?" Peter asked when he pulled up a seat.

"Bad," E.C. said.

Delmario nodded. "Hell, worse'n bad, it's starting to look like that damn sac is unsound after all. I can't believe it, I just can't, it all looks so promising, got to be something there. Got to. But I'm damned if I can find it."

E.C. added, "The surprise he pulled today is a threat in a number of variations. Don't forget, we gave up two pieces to get to this position. Unfortunately, that means that Brucie can easily afford to give some of that material back to get out of the fix. He still comes out ahead, and wins the endgame. We've found a few improvements on my play this morning —"

"That knight doesn't have to drop," interjected Delmario.

"... but nothing convincing," E.C. concluded.

"You ever think," Delmario said, "that maybe the Funny Bunny was right? That maybe the sac don't work, maybe the game was never won at all?" His voice had

a note of glum disbelief in it.

"There's one thing wrong with that," Peter said.

"Ten years ago, after Bunnish had blown the game and the match, Robinson Vesselere admitted that he had been lost."

E.C. looked thoughtful. "That's true. I'd forgotten that."

"Vesselere was almost a Senior Master. He had to know what he was talking about. The win is there. I mean to find it."

Delmario clapped his hands together and whooped gleefully. "Hell yes, Pete, you're right! Let's go!"

"AT LAST the prodigal spouse returns," Kathy said pointedly when Peter came in. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

She was seated in a chair by the fireplace, though the fire had burned down to ashes and embers. She wore a dark robe, and the end of the cigarette she was smoking was a bright point in the darkness. Peter had come in smiling, but now he frowned. Kathy had once been a heavy smoker, but she'd given it up years ago. Now she only lit a cigarette when she was very upset. When she lit up, it usually meant they were headed for a vicious row.

"It's late," Peter said. "I don't know how late. What does it matter?" He'd spent most of the night with E.C. and Steve, but it had been worth it. They'd found what they had been looking for. Peter had returned tired but elated, expecting to find his wife asleep. He was in no mood for grief. "Never mind about the time," he said to her, trying to placate. "We've got it, Kath."

She crushed out her cigarette methodically. "Got what? Some new move you think is going to defeat our psychopathic host? Don't you understand that I don't give a damn about this stupid game of yours? Don't you listen to a thing I say? I've been waiting up half the night, Peter. It's almost three in the morning. I want to talk."

"Yeah?" Peter snapped. Her tone had gotten his back up. "Did you ever think that maybe I didn't want to listen? Well, think it. I have a big game tomorrow. I need

my sleep. I can't afford to stay up till dawn screaming at you. Understand? Why the hell are you so hot to talk anyway? What could you possibly have to say that I haven't heard before, huh?"

Kathy laughed nastily. "I could tell you a few things about your old friend Bunnish that you haven't heard before."

"I doubt it."

"Do you? Well, did you know that he's been trying to get me into bed for the past two days?"

She said it tauntingly, throwing it at him. Peter felt as if he had been struck. "What?"

"Sit down," she snapped, "and listen." Numbly, he did as she bid him. "Did you?" he asked, staring at her silhouette in the darkness, the vaguely ominous shape that was his wife.

"Did *P*? Sleep with him, you mean? Jesus, Peter, how can you ask that? Do you loathe me that much? I'd sooner sleep with a roach. That's what he reminds me of anyway." She gave a rueful chuckle. "He isn't exactly a sophisticated seducer, either. He actually offered me money."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"To knock some goddamned sense into you! Can't you see that Bunnish is trying to destroy you, all of you, anyway he can? He didn't want me. He just wanted to get at you. And you, you and your moron teammates, are playing right into his hands. You're becoming as obsessed with that idiot chess game as he is." She leaned forward. Dimly, Peter could make out the lines of her face. "Peter," she said almost imploringly, "don't play him. He's going to beat you, love, just like he beat the others."

"I don't think so, love," Peter said from between clenched teeth. The endearment became an epithet as he hurled it back at her. "Why the hell are you always so ready to predict defeat for me, huh? Can't you ever be supportive, not even for a goddamned minute? If you won't help, why don't you just bug off? I've had all I can stand of you, damn it. Always belittling me, mocking. You've never believed in me. I don't know why the hell you married me, if all you wanted to do was make my life a

hell. Just leave me alone!"

For a long moment after Peter's outburst there was silence. Sitting there in the darkened room, he could almost feel her rage building — any instant now he expected to hear her start screaming. Then he would scream back, and she would get up and break something, and he would grab her, and then the knives would come out in earnest. He closed his eyes, trembling, feeling close to tears. He didn't want this, he thought. He really didn't.

But Kathy fooled him. When she spoke, her voice was surprisingly gentle. "Oh, Peter," she said. "I never meant to hurt you, Please. I love you."

He was stunned. "Love me?" he said wonderingly.

"Please listen. If there is anything at all left between us, please just listen to me for a few minutes. Please."

"All right," he said.

"Peter, I *did* believe in you once. Surely you must remember how good things were in the beginning? I was supportive then, wasn't I? The first few years, when you were writing your novel? I worked, I kept food on the table, I gave you the time to write."

"Oh, yes," he said, anger creeping back into his tone. Kathy had thrown that at him before, had reminded him forcefully of how she'd supported them for two years while he wrote a book that turned out to be so much waste paper. "Spare me your reproaches, huh? It wasn't my fault I couldn't sell the book. You heard what Bunnish said."

"I wasn't reproaching you, damn it!" she snapped. "Why are you always so ready to read criticism into every word I say?" She shook her head, and got her voice back under control. "Please, Peter, don't make this harder than it is. We have so many years of pain to overcome, so many wounds to bind up. Just hear me out."

"I was trying to say that I *did* believe in you. Even after the book after you burned it . . . even then. You made it hard, though. I didn't think you were a failure, but you did, and it changed you, Peter. You let it get to you. You gave up writing, instead of just gritting your teeth and doing

another book."

"I wasn't tough enough, I know," he said. "The loser. The weakling."

"Shut up!" she said in exasperation. "I didn't say that, you did. Then you went into journalism. I still believed. But everything kept going wrong. You got fired, you got sued, you became a disgrace. Our friends started drifting away. And all the time you insisted that none of it was your fault. You lost all the rest of your self-confidence. You didn't dream any more. You whined, bitterly and incessantly, about your bad luck."

"You never helped."

"Maybe not," Kathy admitted. "I tried to, at the start, but it just got worse and worse and I couldn't deal with it. You weren't the dreamer I'd married. It was hard to remember how I'd admired you, how I'd respected you. Peter, you loathed yourself so much that there was no way to keep the loathing from rubbing off on me."

"So?" Peter said. "What's the point, Kathy?"

"I never left you, Peter," she said. "I could have, you know. I wanted to. I stayed, through all of it, all the failures and all the self-pity. Doesn't that say anything to you?"

"It says you're a masochist," he snapped. "Or maybe a sadist."

That was too much for her. She started to reply, and her voice broke, and she began to weep. Peter sat where he was and listened to her cry. Finally the tears ran out, and she said, quietly, "Damn you. Damn you. I hate you."

"I thought you loved me. Make up your mind."

"You ass. You insensitive creep. Don't you understand, Peter?"

"Understand *what*?" he said impatiently. "You said listen, so I've been listening, and all you've been doing is rehashing all the same old stuff, recounting all my inadequacies. I heard it all before."

"Peter, can't you see that this week has changed everything? If you'd only stop hating, stop loathing me and yourself, maybe you could see it. We have a chance again, Peter. If we try. Please."

"I don't see that anything has changed."

I'm going to play a big chess game tomorrow, and you know how much it means to me and my self respect, and you don't care. You don't care if I win or lose. You keep telling me I'm going to lose. You're helping me to lose by making me argue when I should be sleeping. What the hell has changed? You're the same damn bitch you've been for years."

"I will tell you what has changed," she said. "Peter, up until a few days ago, both of us thought you were a failure. But you aren't! It hasn't been your fault. None of it. Not bad luck, like you kept saying, and not personal inadequacy either, like you really thought. Bunnish has done it all. Can't you see what a difference that makes? You've never had a chance, Peter, but you have one now. There's no reason you shouldn't believe in yourself. We know you can do a great thing! Bunnish admitted it. We can leave here, you and I, and start all over again. You could write another book, write plays, do anything you want. You have the talent. You've never lacked it. We can dream again, believe again, love each other again. Don't you see? Bunnish had to go to complete his revenge, but by gloating he's freed you!"

Peter sat very still in the dark room, his hand clenching and unclenching on the arm of the chair as Kathy's words sunk in. He had been so wrapped up in the chess game, so obsessed with Bunnish's obsession, that he had never seen it, never considered it. *It wasn't me*, he thought wonderingly. *All those years, it was never me.* "It's true," he said in a small voice.

"Peter?" she said, concerned.

He heard the concern, heard more than that, heard love in her voice. So many people, he thought, make such grand promises, promise better or worse, promise rich or poorer, and bail out as soon as things turn the least bit sour in a relationship. But she had stayed, through all of it, the failures, the disgrace, the cruel words and the poisonous thoughts, the weekly fights, the poverty. She had stayed.

"Kathy," he said. The next words were very hard. "I love you, too." He started to get up and move toward her, and began to cry.

THEY ARRIVED late the next morning. They had showered together, and Peter had dressed with unusual care. For some reason, he felt it was important to look his best. It was a new beginning, after all. Kathy came with him. They entered the living room holding hands. Bunnish was already behind the board, and Peter's clock was ticking. The others were there too. E.C. was seated patiently in a chair. Delmario was pacing. "Hurry up," he said when Peter came down the stairs. "You've lost five minutes already."

Peter smiled. "Easy, Steve," he said. He went over and took his seat behind the White pieces. Kathy stood behind him. She looked gorgeous this morning. Peter thought.

"It's your move, captain," Bunnish said, with an unpleasant smile.

"I know," Peter said. He made no effort to move, scarcely even looked at the board. "Bruce, why do you hate me? I've been thinking about that, and I'd like to know the answer. I can understand about Steve and E.C. Steve had the presumption to win when you lost, and he rubbed your nose in that defeat afterwards. E.C. made you the butt of his jokes. But why me? What did I ever do to you?"

Bunnish looked briefly confused. Then his face grew hard. "You. You were the worst of them all."

Peter was startled. "I never..."

"The big captain," Bunnish said sarcastically. "That day ten years ago, you never even tried. You took a quick grandmaster draw with your old friend Hal Winslow. You could have tried for a win, played on, but you didn't. Oh, no. You never cared how much more pressure you put on the rest of us. And when we lost, you didn't take any of the blame, not a bit of it, even though you gave up half a point. It was all my fault. And that wasn't all of it, either. Why was I on first board, Norton? All of us on the B team had approximately the same rating. How did I get the honor of being board one?"

Peter thought for a minute, trying to recall the strategies that had motivated him ten years before. Finally he nodded. "You always lost the big games, Bruce. It

made sense to put you on board one, where you'd face the other teams' big guns, the ones who'd probably beat whoever we played there. That way the lower boards would be manned by more reliable players, the ones we could count on in the clutch."

"In other words," Bunnish said, "I was a write-off. You expected me to lose, while you won matches on the lower boards."

"Yes," Peter admitted. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry," mocked Bunnish. "You made me lose, expected me to lose, and then tormented me for losing, and now you're sorry. You didn't play chess that day. You never played chess. You were playing a bigger game, a game that lasted for years, between you and Winslow of U.C. And the team members were your pieces and your pawns. Me, I was a sac. A gambit. That was all. And it didn't work anyway. Winslow beat you. You lost."

"You're right," Peter admitted. "I lost. I think I understand now. Why you did all the things you've done."

"You're going to lose again now," Bunnish said. "Move, before your clock runs out." He nodded down at the checkered wasteland that lay between them, at the complex jumble of Black and White pieces.

Peter glanced at the board with disinterest. "We analyzed until three in the morning last night, the three of us. I had a new variation all set. A single sacrifice, instead of the double sac. I play knight takes pawn, but I hold back from the bishop sac, swing my queen over instead. That was the idea. It looked pretty good. But it's unsound, isn't it?"

Bunnish stared at him. "Play it, and we'll find out!"

"No," said Peter. "I don't want to play."

"Peter!" Steve Delmario said in consternation. "You got to, what are you saying, beat this damn bastard."

Peter looked at him. "It's no good, Steve."

There was silence. Finally Bunnish said, "You're a coward, Norton. A coward and a failure and a weakling. Play the game out."

"I'm not interested in the game, Bruce. Just tell me. The variation is unsound."

Bunnish made a disgusted noise. "Yes, yes," he snapped. "It's unsound. There's a countersac, I give up a rook to break up your mating threats, but I win a piece back a few moves later."

"All the variations are unsound, aren't they?" Peter said.

Bunnish smiled thinly.

"White doesn't have a won game at all," Peter said. "We were wrong, all those years. You never blew the win. You never had a win. Just a position that looked good superficially, but led nowhere."

"Wisdom, at last," Bunnish said. "I've had computers print out every possible variant. They take forever, but I've had lifetimes. When I flashed back — you have no idea how many times I have flashed back, trying one new idea after another — that is always my target point, that day in Evanston, the game with Vessellere. I've tried every move there is to be tried in that position, every wild idea. It makes no difference. Vessellere always beats me. All the variations are unsound."

"But," Delmario protested, looking bewildered, "Vessellere said he was lost. He said so!"

Bunnish looked at him with contempt. "I had made him sweat a lot in a game he should have won easily. He was just getting back. He was a vindictive man, and he knew that by saying that he'd make the loss that much more painful. He smirked. 'I've taken care of him too, you know.'"

E.C. Stuart rose from his chair and straightened his vest. "If we're done now, Bruce, maybe you would be so kind as to let us out of Bunnishland?"

"You can go," Bunnish said. "And that drunk, too. But not Peter." He showed his dimples. "Why, Peter has almost won, in a sense. So I'm going to be generous. You know what I'm going to do for you, captain? I'm going to let you use my flashlight device."

"No thank you," Peter said.

Bunnish stared, befuddled. "What do you mean, no? Don't you understand what I'm giving you? You can wipe out all your failures, try again, make some different moves. Be a success in another timeline."

"I know. Of course, that would leave

Kathy with a dead body in this timeline, wouldn't it? And you with the satisfaction of driving me to something that uncannily resembles suicide. No. I'll take my chances with the future instead of the past. With Kathy."

Bunnish let his mouth droop open. "What do you care about her? She hates you anyway. She'll be better off with you dead. She'll get the insurance money and you'll get somebody better, somebody who cares about you."

"But I do care about him," Kathy said. She put a hand on Peter's shoulder. He reached up and touched it, and smiled.

"Then you're a fool too," Bunnish cried. "He's nothing, he'll never be anything. I'll see to that."

Peter stood up. "I don't think so, somehow. I don't think you can hurt us anymore. Any of us." He looked at the others. "What do you think, guys?"

E.C. cocked his head thoughtfully, and ran a finger along the underside of his mustache. "You know," he said, "I think you're right."

Delmario just seemed baffled, until all of a sudden the light broke across his face, and he grinned. "You can't steal ideas I haven't come up with yet, can you?" he said to Bunnish. "Not in this timeline, anyhow." He made a loud whooping sound and stepped up to the chessboard. Reaching down, he stopped the clock. "Checkmate," he said. "Checkmate, checkmate, checkmate!"

LESS THAN TWO weeks later, Kathy knocked softly on the door of his study. "Wait a sec!" Peter shouted. He typed out another sentence, then flicked off the typewriter and swiveled in his chair. "C'mon in."

She opened the door and smiled at him. "I made some tuna salad, if you want to take a break for lunch. How's the book coming?"

"Good," Peter said. "I should finish the second chapter today, if I keep at it." She was holding a newspaper, he noticed. "What's that?"

"I thought you ought to see this," she replied, handing it over.

She'd folded it open to the obits. Peter took it and read. Millionaire electronics genius Bruce Bunnish had been found dead in his Colorado home, hooked up to a strange device that had seemingly electrocuted him. Peter sighed.

"He's going to try again, isn't he?" Kathy said.

Peter put down the newspaper. "The poor bastard. He can't see it."

"See what?"

Peter took her hand and squeezed it. "All the variations are unsound," he said. It made him sad. But after lunch, he soon forgot about it, and went back to work.

George R.R. Martin

George R.R. Martin is a 33-year-old refugee of New Jersey, Chicago, and Iowa, presently making his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A winner of three Hugo Awards and one Nebula, Martin worked as a sportswriter, VISTA Volunteer, chess tournament director, and college instructor before turning to full-time writing in 1979.

His most recent novel, *Windhaven*, was written in collaboration with Lisa Tuttle, and released in hardcovers by Timescape Books last April, to enthusiastic reviews. A portion of the novel, "The Fall," appeared in last May's *Amazing*.

His forthcoming books include *Sandkings*, a short story collection featuring his Hugo- and Nebula-winning novelette of the same title and scheduled for release in December 1981 from Pocket Books, and a major new solo novel titled *Fevre Dream*, due in the fall of 1982. Previous Martin publications include one novel, *Dying of the Light* (Pocket 1978), and two earlier collections, *A Song for Lya* and *Other Stories* (Avon, 1976) and *Songs of Stars and Shadow* (Pocket 1977).

He is also the editor of the critically-acclaimed *New Voices* series of original anthologies, the fourth volume of which was released in September by Berkley,

featuring stories by John Varley, Tom Reamy, M.A. Foster, Arsen Darnay, and Joan D. Vinge, plus an introduction by A.E. Van Vogt.

Martin attended Northwestern University from 1967 to 1971, and received a BS in journalism in 1970, an MS in 1971. While at Northwestern, he served four terms as president of the campus chess club, captained Northwestern's teams in

intercollegiate play (most fervently against arch-rival University of Chicago teams), and organized the 1970-71 North American Intercollegiate Team Championships. . . but please recall that "Unsound Variations" is fiction, and that any resemblance to real persons, events, and chess games is strictly coincidental.

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Theodore Sturgeon

A WAY OF THINKING

About A WAY OF THINKING

Before I was a writer I was a sailor in the U.S. Merchant Marine. I went to some strange places and met some strange people. One of the most memorable of all was the man you're about to meet (if you haven't met him before). My description of him, and the episodes of the deck winch, the tarpaper cat-house, and the flying fan, are not fiction, but reportage. Tall, feline, soft-voiced, always laid-back and relaxed, with those long green eyes, Kelley is unforgettable, even though I've not seen him for many years. I'm quite sure I have more to say about him; one of these days he will slide gently into my typewriter and amaze me.

It says in this story that "he's in Atlanta now." That's Atlanta Penitentiary, I'm sorry to say. I quite forget who told me that, and I never did learn why that was so, and I've always wondered. I am sure, however, that what got him there was the

result of his unique way of thinking. I am also sure that his stay could not have been long; as he once took the outside off a building to get in, he was quite capable of taking the inside out of a jail to get out. Don't ask me how. Ask Kelley.

— Theodore Sturgeon
June, 1981

I'll have to start with an anecdote or two that you may have heard from me before, but they'll bear repeating, since it's Kelley we're talking about.

I shipped out with Kelley when I was a kid. Tankships, mostly coastwise: load somewhere in the oil country — New Orleans, Aransas Pass, Port Arthur, or some such, and unload at ports north of



Illustrated by Stephen Fabian

Hattaras. Eight days out, eighteen hours in, give or take a day or six hours. Kelley was ordinary seaman on my watch, which was a laugh; he knew more about the sea than anyone aft of the bridge. But he never ribbed me, stumbling around the place with my blue A.B. ticket. He had a sense of humor in his peculiar quiet way, but he never gratified it by proofs of the obvious — that he was twice the seaman I could ever be.

There were a lot of unusual things about Kelley, the way he looked, the way he moved; but most unusual was the way he thought. He was like one of those extra-terrestrials you read about, who can think as well as a human being but not like a human being. Just for example, there was that night in Port Arthur. I was sitting in a honkytonk up over a bar with a red-headed girl called Red, trying to mind my own business while watching a chick known as Boots, who sat alone over by the jukebox. This girl Boots was watching the door and grinding her teeth, and I knew why, and I was worried. See, Kelley had been seeing her pretty regularly, but this trip he'd made the break and word was around that he was romancing a girl in Pete's place — a very unpopular kind of rumor for Boots to be chewing on. I also knew that Kelley would be along any minute because he'd promised to meet me here.

And in he came, running up that long straight flight of steps easy as a cat, and when he got in the door everybody just hushed, except the juke-box, and it sounded scared.

Now, just over Boots's shoulder on a little shelf was an electric fan. It had sixteen-inch blades and no guard. The very second Kelley's face showed in the doorway Boots rose up like a snake out of a basket, reached behind her, snatched that fan off the shelf and threw it.

It might as well have been done with a slow-motion camera as far as Kelley was concerned. He didn't move his feet at all. He bent sideways, just a little, from the waist, and turned his wide shoulders. Very clearly I heard three of those whining blade-tips touch a button on his shirt bip-

bip-bip! and then the fan hit the doorpost. Even the juke-box shut up then. It was so quiet. Kelley didn't say anything and neither did anyone else.

Now, if you believe in do-as-you-get-done-to, and someone heaves an infernal machine at you, you'll pick it right up and heave it back. But Kelley doesn't think like you. He didn't even look at the fan.

He just watched Boots, and she was white and crazed-looking, waiting for whatever he might have in mind.

He went across the room to her, fast but not really hurrying, and he picked her out from behind that table, and he threw her.

He threw her at the fan.

She hit the floor and slid, sweeping up the fan where it lay, hitting the doorjamb with her head, spinning out into the stairway. Kelley walked after her, stepped over her, went on downstairs and back to the ship.

And there was the time we shipped a new main spur gear for the starboard winch. The deck engineer used up the whole morning watch trying to get the old gear-wheel off its shaft. He heated the hub. He pounded it. He put in wedges. He hooked on with a handybilly — that's a four-sheave block-and-tackle to you — and all he did with that was break a U-bolt.

Then Kelley came on deck, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, and took one brief look. He walked over to the winch, snatched up a crescent wrench, and relieved the four bolts that held the housing tight around the shaft. He then picked up a twelve-pound maul, hefted it, and swung it just once. The maul hit the end of the shaft and the shaft shot out of the other side of the machine like a torpedo out of its tube. The gearwheel fell down on the deck. Kelley went forward to take the helm and thought no more about it, while the deck crew stared after him, wall-eyed. You see what I mean? Problem: Get a wheel off a shaft. But in Kelley's book it's: Get the shaft out of the wheel.

I kibitzed him at poker one time and saw him discard two pair and draw a winning straight flush. Why that discard? Because he'd just realized the deck was stacked. Why the flush? God knows. All Kelley did

was pick up the pot — a big one — grin at the sharper, and quit the game.

I have plenty more yarns like that, but you get the idea. The guy had a special way of thinking, that's all, and it never failed him.

I lost track of Kelley. I came to regret that now and then; he made a huge impression on me, and some times I used to think about him when I had a tough problem to solve. What would Kelley do? And sometimes it helped, and sometimes it didn't; and when it didn't I guess it was because I'm not Kelley.

I came ashore and got married and did all sorts of other things, and the years went by, and a war came and went, and one warm spring evening I went into a place I know on West 48th St. because I felt like drinking *tequila* and I can always get it there. And who should be sitting in a booth finishing up a big Mexican dinner but — no, not Kelley.

It was Milton. He looks like a college sophomore with money. His suits are always cut just so, but quiet; and when he's relaxed he looks as if he's just been tagged and it matters to him, and when he's worried you want to ask him has he been cutting classes again. It happens he's a damn good doctor.

He was worried, but he gave me a good hello and waved me into the booth while he finished up. We had small talk and I tried to buy him a drink. He looked real wistful and then shook his head. "Patient in ten minutes," he said, looking at his watch.

"Then it's nearby. Come back afterward."

"Better yet," he said, getting up, "come with me. This might interest you, come to think of it."

He got his hat and paid Rudy, and I said "Luego," and Rudy grinned and slapped the *tequila* bottle. Nice place, Rudy's.

"What about the patient?" I asked as we turned up the avenue. I thought for a while he hadn't heard me, but at last he said, "Four busted ribs and a compound femoral. Minor internal haemorrhage which might or might not be a ruptured spleen. Necrosis of the oral frenum — or was while there was any frenum left."

"What's a frenum?"

"That little strip of tissue under your tongue."

"Ongk," I said, trying to reach it with the tip of my tongue. "What a healthy fellow."

"Pulmonary adhesions," Milton ruminated. "Not serious, certainly not tubercular. But they hurt and they bleed and I don't like 'em. And acne rosacea." "That's the nose like a stoplight, isn't it?" "It isn't as funny as that to the guy that has it."

I was quelled. "What was it — a goon-squad?"

He shook his head.

"A truck?"

"No."

"He fell off something?"

Milton stopped and turned and looked me straight in the eye. "No," he said. "Nothing like that. Nothing like anything. Nothing," he said, walking again, "at all."

I said nothing to that because there was nothing to say.

"He just went to bed," said Milton thoughtfully, "because he felt off his oats. And one by one these things happened to him."

"In bed?"

"Well," said Milton, in a to-be-absolutely-accurate tone, "when the ribs broke he was on his way back from the bathroom."

"You're kidding."

"No I'm not."

"He's lying."

Milton said, "I believe him."

I know Milton. There's no doubt that he believed the man. I said, "I keep reading things about psychosomatic disorders. But a broken — what did you say it was?"

"Femur. Thigh, that is. Compound. Oh, it's rare, all right. But it can happen, has happened. Those muscles are pretty powerful, you know. They deliver twenty, three hundred pound thrusts every time you walk up stairs. In certain spastic hysteria, they'll break bones easily enough."

"What about all those other things?" "Functional disorders, every one of 'em. No germ disease."

"Now this boy," I said, "really has

something on his mind."

"Yes, I suppose he has."

But I didn't ask what. I could hear the discussion closing as if it had a spring latch on it.

We went into a door tucked between store-fronts and climbed three flights. Milton put out his hand to a bell-push and then dropped it without ringing. There was a paper tacked to the door.

DOC I WENT FOR SHOTS COME ON IN.

It was unsigned. Milton turned the knob and we went in.

The first thing that hit me was the smell. Not too strong, but not the kind of thing you ever forget if you ever had to dig a slit-trench through last week's burial pit. "That's the necrosis," muttered Milton. "Damn it." He gestured. "Hang your hat over there. Sit down. I'll be out soon." He went into an inner room, saying, "Hi, Hal," at the doorway. From inside came an answering rumble, and something twisted in my throat to hear it, for no voice which is that tired should sound that cheerful.

I sat watching the wallpaper and laboriously un-listening those clinical grunts and the gay-weary responses in the other room. The wallpaper was awful. I remember a night-club act where Reginald Gardiner used to give sound-effect renditions of wallpaper designs. This one, I decided, would run "Body to weep . . . yawp yawp; body to weep . . . yawp yawp;" very faintly, with the final syllable a straining reth. I had just reached a particularly clumsy join where the paper utterly demolished its own rhythm and went "Yawp yawpbody to weep" when the outer door opened and I leaped to my feet with the rush of utter guilt one feels when caught in an unlikely place with no curt and lucid explanation.

He was two long strides into the room, tall, and soft-footed, his face and long green eyes quite at rest, when he saw me. He stopped as if on leaf-springs and shock absorbers, not suddenly, completely controlled, and asked, "Who are you?"

"I'll be damned," I answered. "Kelley!" He peered at me with precisely the expression I had seen so many times when

he watched the little square windows on the one-arm bandits we used to play together. I could almost hear the tumblers, see the drums stop; not lemon . . . cherry . . . cherry . . . and click! "I be goddamn," he drawled, to indicate that he was even more surprised than I was. He transferred the small package he carried from his right hand to his left and shook hands. His hand went once and a half times around mine with enough left over to tie a half-hitch. "Where in time you been keepin' yours? How'd you smoke me out?"

"I never," I said. (Saying it, I was aware that I always fell into the idiom of people who impressed me, to the exact degree of that impression. So I always found myself talking more like Kelley than Kelley's shaving mirror.) I was grinning so wide my face hurt. "I'm glad to see you." I shook hands with him again, foolishly. "I came with the doctor."

"You a doctor now?" he said, his tone prepared for wonders.

"I'm a writer," I said deprecatingly.

"Yeah, I heard," he reminded himself. His eyes narrowed; as of old, it had the effect of sharp-focussing a searchlight beam. "I heard!" he repeated with deeper interest. "Stories. Gremlins and flyin' saucers all like that." I nodded. He said, without insult, "Hell of a way to make a living."

"What about you?"

"Ships. Some drydock. Tank cleaning. Compass 'djustin'. For a while had a job holdin' a insurance inspector's head. You know."

I glanced at the big hands that could weld or steer or compute certainly with the excellence that I used to know, and marvelled that he found himself so unremarkable. I pulled myself back to here-and-now and nodded toward the inner room. "I'm holding you up."

"No you ain't. Milton, he knows what he's doin'. He wants me, he'll holler."

"Who's sick?"

His face darkened like the sea in scud-weather, abruptly and deep down. "My brother." He looked at me searchingly. He's . . . Then he seemed to check

himself. "He's sick," he said unnecessarily, and added quickly, "He's going to be all right, though."

"Sure," I said quickly.

I had the feeling that we were both lying and that neither of us knew why.

Milton came out, laughing a laugh that cut off as soon as he was out of range of the sick man. Kelley turned to him slowly, as if slowness were the only alternative to leaping on the doctor, pounding the news out of him. "Hello, Kelley. Heard you come in."

"How is he, Doc?"

Milton looked up quickly, his bright round eyes clashing with Kelley's slitted fierce ones. "You got to take it easy, Kelley. What'll happen to him if you crack up?"

"Nobody's cracking up. What do you want me to do?"

Milton saw the package on the table. He picked it up and opened it. There was a leather case and two phials. "Ever use one of these before?"

"He was a pre-med before he went to sea," I said suddenly.

Milton stared at me. "You two know each other?"

I looked at Kelley. "Sometimes I think I invented him."

Kelley snorted and thumped my shoulder. Happily I had one hand on a built-in china shelf. His big hand continued the motion and took the hypodermic case from the doctor. "Sterilize the shaft and needle," he said sleepily, as if reading. "Assemble without touching needle with fingers. To fill, puncture diaphragm and withdraw plunger. Squirt upward to remove air and prevent embolism. Locate major vein in —"

Milton laughed. "Okay, okay. But forget the vein. Any place will do — it's subcutaneous, that's all. I've written the exact amounts to be used for exactly the symptoms you can expect. Don't jump the gun, Kelley. And remember how you salt your stew. Just because a little is good, it doesn't figure that a lot has to be better."

Kelley was wearing that sleepy-inattention which, I remembered, meant only that he was taking in every single

word like a tape recorder. He tossed the leather case gently, caught it. "Now?" he said.

"Not now," the doctor said positively. "Only when you have to."

Kelley seemed frustrated. I suddenly understood that he wanted to do something, build something, fight something. Anything but sit and wait for therapy to bring results. I said, "Kelley, any brother of yours is a — well, you know. I'd like to say hello, if it's at all —"

Immediately and together Kelley and the doctor said loudly, "Sure, when he's on his feet," and "Better not just now, I've just given him a sedat —" And together they stopped awkwardly.

"Let's get that drink," I said before they could flounder any more.

"Now you're talking. You too, Kelley. It'll do you good."

"Not me," said Kelley. "Hal —"

"I knocked him out," said the doctor bluntly. "You'll cluck around scratching for worms and looking for hawks till you wake him up, and he needs his sleep. Come on."

Painfully I had to add to my many mental images of Kelley the very first one in which he was indecisive. I hated it.

"Well," said Kelley, "let me go see."

He disappeared. I looked at Milton's face, and turned quickly away. I was sure he wouldn't want me to see that expression of sick pity and bafflement.

Kelley came out, moving silently as always. "Yeah, asleep," he said. "For how long?"

"I'd say four hours at least."

"Well all right." From the old-fashioned clothes-tree he took a battered black engineer's cap with a shiny, crazed patent-leather visor. I laughed. Both men turned to me, with annoyance, I thought.

On the landing outside I explained. "The hat," I said. "Remember? Tampico?"

"Oh," he grunted. He thwacked it against his forearm.

"He left it on the bar of this ginmill," I told Milton. "We got back to the gangplank and he missed it. Nothing would do but he has to go back for it, so I went with him."

"You was wearin' a *tequila* label on your face," Kelley said. "Kept tryin' to tell the taximan you was a bottle."

"He didn't speak English."

Kelley flashed something like his old grin. "He got the idea."

"Anyway," I told Milton, "the place was closed when we got there. We tried the front door and the side doors and they were locked like Alcatraz. We made so much racket I guess if anyone was inside they were afraid to open up. We could see Kelley's hat in there on the bar. Nobody's about to steal that hat."

"It's a good hat," he said in an injured tone.

"Kelley goes into action," I said. "Kelley don't think like other people, you know, Mit. He squints through the window at the other wall, goes around the building, sets one foot against the corner stud, gets his fingers under the edge of that corrugated iron siding they use. T'll pry this out a bit," he says. "You slide in and get my hat."

"Corrugated was only nailed on one-by-twos," said Kelley.

"He gives one almighty pull," I chuckled, "and the whole damn side falls out of the building. I mean the second floor too. You never heard such clap-o'-thunder in your life."

"I got my hat," said Kelley. He uttered two syllables of a laugh. "Whole second floor was a you-know-what, an' the one single stairway come out with the wall."

"Taxi driver just took off. But he left his taxi. Kelley drove back. I couldn't. I was laughing."

"You was drunk."

"Well, some," I said.

We walked together, quietly, happily. Out of Kelley's sight, Milton thumped me gently on the ribs. It was eloquent and it pleased me. It said that was a long time since Kelley had laughed. It was a long time since he had thought about anything but Hal.

I guess we felt it equally when, with no trace of humor . . . more, as if he had let my episode just blow itself out until he could be heard . . . Kelley said, "Doc, what's with the hand?"

"It'll be all right," Milton said.

"You put splints."

Milton sighed. "All right, all right. Three fractures. Two on the middle finger and one on the ring."

Kelley said, "I saw they was swollen."

I looked at Kelley's face and I looked at Milton's, and I didn't like either, and I wished to God I were somewhere else, in a uranium mine maybe, or making out my income tax. I said, "Here we are. Ever been to Rudy's, Kelley?"

He looked up at the little yellow-and-red marquee. "No."

"Come on," I said. "*Tequila*."

We went in and got a booth. Kelley ordered beer. I got mad and then started to call him some things I'd picked up on waterfronts from here to Tierra del Fuego. Milton stared wall-eyed at me and Kelley stared at his hands. After a while Milton began to jot some of it down on a prescription pad he took from his pocket. I was pretty proud.

Kelley gradually got the idea. If I wanted to pick up the tab and he wouldn't let me, his habits were those of *uno puneto sin cojones* (which a Spanish dictionary will reliably misinform you means "a weakening without eggs") and his affections for his forebears were so powerful but irreverent. I won, and soon he was lapping up a huge combination plate of beef *rostados*, chicken *enchiladas*, and pork *tacos*. He endeared himself to Rudy by demanding salt and lemon with his *tequila* and despatching same with flawless ritual: hold the lemon between left thumb and forefinger, lick the back of the left hand, sprinkle salt on the wet spot, lift the *tequila* with the right, lick the salt, drink the *tequila*, bite the lemon. Soon he was imitating the German second mate we shipped out of Puerto Barrios one night, who ate fourteen green bananas and lost them and all his teeth over the side, in gummed gutturals which had us roaring.

But after that question about fractured fingers back there in the street, Milton and I weren't fooled any more, and though everyone tried hard and it was a fine try, none of the laughter went deep enough or stayed long enough, and I wanted to cry.

We all had a huge hunk of the

nesselrode pie made by Rudy's beautiful blond wife — pie you can blow off your plate by flapping a napkin . . . sweet smoke with calories. And then Kelley demanded to know what time it was and cussed and stood up.

"It's only been two hours," Milton said.

"I just as soon head home all the same," said Kelley. "Thanks."

"Wait," I said. I got a scrap of paper out of my wallet and wrote on it. "Here's my phone. I want to see you some more. I'm working for myself these days; my time's my own. I don't sleep much, so call me any time you feel like it."

He took the paper. "You're no good," he said. "You never were no good." The way he said it, I felt fine.

"On the corner is a newsstand," I told him. "There's a magazine there called *Amazing* with one of my lousy stories in it."

"They print it on a roll?" he demanded. He waved at us, nodded to Rudy, and went out.

I swept up some spilled sugar on the table top and pushed it around until it was a perfect square. After a while I shoved in the sides until it was a lozenge. Milton didn't say anything either. Rudy, as is his way, had sense enough to stay away from us.

"Well, that did him some good," Milton said after a while.

"You know better than that," I said bitterly.

Milton said patiently, "Kelley thinks we think it did him some good. And thinking that does him good."

I had to smile at that contortion, and after that it was easier to talk. "The kid going to live?"

Milton waited, as if another answer might spring from somewhere, but it didn't. He said, "No."

"Fine doctor."

"Don't!" he snapped. He looked up at me. "Look, if this was one of those — well, say pleurisy cases on the critical list, without the will to live, why I'd know what to do. Usually those depressed cases have such a violent desire to be reassured,

down deep, that you can snap 'em right out of it if only you can think of the right thing to say. And you usually can. But Hal's not one of those. He wants to live. If he didn't want so much to live he'd've been dead three weeks ago. What's killing him is sheer somatic trauma — one broken bone after another, one failing or inflamed internal organ after another."

"Who's doing it?"

"Damn it, nobody's doing it!" He caught me biting my lip. "If either one of us should say Kelley's doing it, the other one will punch him in the mouth. Right?"

"Right."

"Just so that doesn't have to happen," said Milton carefully. "I'll tell you what you're bound to ask me in a minute: why isn't he in a hospital?"

"Okay, why?"

"He was. For weeks. And all the time he was there these things kept on happening to him, only worse. More, and more often. I got him home as soon as it was safe to get him out of traction for that broken thigh. He's much better off with Kelley. Kelley keeps him cheered up, cooks for him, medicates him — the works. It's all Kelley does these days."

"I figured. It must be getting pretty tough."

"It is. I wish I had your ability with invective. You can't lend that man anything, give him anything . . . proud? God!"

"Don't take this personally, but have you had consultation?"

He shrugged. "Six ways from the middle. And nine-tenths of it behind Kelley's back, which isn't easy. The lies I've told him! Hal's just got to have a special kind of Persian melon that someone is receiving in a little store in Yonkers. Out Kelley goes, and in the meantime I have to corral two or three doctors and whip 'em in to see Hal and out again before Kelley gets back. Or Hal has to have a special prescription, and I fix up with the druggist to take a good two hours compounding it. Hal saw Grundage, the osteo man, that way, but poor old Ancelowicz the pharmacist got punched in

the chops for the delay."

"Milton, you're all right."

He snarled at me, and then went on quietly, "None of it's done any good. I've learned a whole encyclopedia full of wise words and some therapeutic tricks I didn't know existed. But . . ." He shook his head. "Do you know why Kelley and I wouldn't let you meet Hal?" He wet his lips and cast about for an example. "Remember the pictures of Mussolini's corpse after the mob got through with it?"

I shuddered. "I saw 'em."

"Well, that's what he looks like, only he's alive, which doesn't make it any prettier. Hal doesn't know how bad it is, and neither Kelley nor I would run the risk of having him see it reflected in someone else's face. I wouldn't send a wooden Indian into that room."

I began to pound the table, barely touching it, hitting it harder and harder until Milton caught my wrist. I froze then, unhappily conscious of the eyes of everyone in the place looking at me. Gradually the normal sound of the restaurant resumed. "Sorry."

"It's all right."

"There's got to be some sort of reason!"

His lips twitched in a small acid smile.

"That's what you get down to at last, isn't it? There's always been a reason for everything, and if we don't know it, we can find it out. But just one single example of real unreason is enough to shake our belief in everything. And then the fear gets bigger than the case at hand and extends to a whole universe of concepts labeled 'unproven'. Shows you how little we believe in anything, basically."

"That's a miserable piece of philosophy!"

"Sure. If you have another arrival point for a case like this, I'll buy it with a bonus. Meantime I'll just go on worrying at this one and feeling more scared than I ought to."

"Let's get drunk."

"A wonderful idea."

Neither of us ordered. We just sat there looking at the lozenge of sugar I'd made on the tabletop. After a while I said, "Hasn't Kelley any idea of what's wrong?"

"You know Kelley. If he had an idea he'd be working on it. All he's doing is sitting by watching his brother's body stew and swell like yeast in a vat."

"What about Hal?"

"He isn't lucid much any more. Not if I can help it."

"But maybe he —"

"Look," said Milton, "I don't want to sound cranky or anything, but I can't hold still for a lot of questions like . . ." He stopped, took out his display handkerchief, looked at it, put it away. "I'm sorry. You don't seem to understand that I didn't take this case yesterday afternoon. I've been sweating it out for nearly three months now. I've already thought of everything you're going to think of. Yes, I questioned Hal, back and forth and sideways. Nothing. N-n-nothing."

That last word trailed off in such a peculiar way that I looked up abruptly.

"Tell me," I demanded.

"Tell you what? Suddenly he looked at his watch. I covered it with my hand. 'Come on, Milt.'"

"I don't know what you're — damn it, leave me alone, will you? If it was anything important, I'd've chased it down long ago."

"Tell me the unimportant something."

"No."

"Tell me why you won't tell me."

"Damn you, I'll do that. It's because you're a crackpot. You're a nice guy and I like you, but you're a crackpot." He laughed suddenly, and it hit me like the flare of a flashbulb. "I didn't know you could look so astonished!" he said. "Now take it easy and listen to me. A guy comes out of a steak house and steps on a rusty nail, and ups and dies of tetanus. But your crackpot vegetarian will swear up and down that the man would still be alive if he hadn't poisoned his system with meat, and use the death to prove his point. The perennial Dry will call the same casualty a victim of John Barleycorn if he knows the man had a beer with his steak. This one death can be ardently and wholeheartedly blamed on the man's divorce, his religion, his political affiliations or on a hereditary taint from his great-great-grandfather who

worked for Oliver Cromwell. You're a nice guy and I like you," he said again, "and I am not going to sit across from you and watch you do the crackpot act."

"I do not know," I said slowly and distinctly, "what the hell you are talking about. And now you have to tell me."

"I suppose so," he said sadly. He drew a deep breath. "You believe what you write. No," he said quickly, "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. You grind out all this fantasy and horror stuff and you believe every word of it. More basically, you'd rather believe in the outre and the so-called 'unknowable' than in what I'd call real things. You think I'm talking through my hat."

"I do," I said, "but go ahead."

"If I called you up tomorrow and told you with great joy that they'd isolated a virus for Hal's condition and a serum was on the way, you'd be just as happy about it as I would be, but way down deep you'd wonder if that was what was really wrong with him, or if the serum is what really cured him. If on the other hand I admitted to you that I'd found two small punctures on Hal's throat and a wisp of fog slipping out of the room — by God! see what I mean? You have a gleam in your eye already!"

I covered my eyes. "Don't let me stop you now," I said coldly. "Since you are not going to admit Dracula's punctures, what are you going to admit?"

"A year ago Kelley gave his brother a present. An ugly little brute of a Haitian doll. Hal kept it around to make faces at for a while and then gave it to a girl. He had bad trouble with the girl. She hates him — really hates him. As far as anyone knows she still has the doll. Are you happy now?"

"Happy," I said disgustedly. "But Milt — you're not just ignoring this doll thing. Why, that could easily be the whole basis . . . hey, sit down! Where are you going?"

"I told you I wouldn't sit across from a damn hobbyist. Enter hobbies, exit reason." He recoiled. "Wait — you sit down now."

I gathered up a handful of his well-cut lapels. "We'll both sit down," I said gently, "or I'll prove to your heart's desire that I've

reached the end of reason."

"Yessir," he said good-naturedly, and sat down. I felt like a damn fool. The twinkle left his eyes and he leaned forward. "Perhaps now you'll listen instead of riding off like that. I suppose you know that in many cases the voodoo doll does work, and you know why?"

"Well, yes I didn't think you'd admit it." I got no response from his stony gaze, and at last realized that a fantasist's pose of authority on such matters is bound to sit ill with a serious and progressive physician. A lot less positively, I said, "It comes down to a matter of subjective reality, or what some people call faith. If you believe firmly that the mutilation of a doll with which you identify yourself will result in your own mutilation, well, that's what will happen."

"That, and a lot of things even a horror-story writer could find out if he researched anywhere except in his projective imagination. For example, there are Arabs in North Africa today whom you dare not insult in any way really important to them. If they feel injured, they'll threaten to die, and if you call the bluff they'll sit down, cover their heads, and damn well die. There are psychosomatic phenomena like the stigmata, or wounds of the cross, which appear from time to time on the hands, feet and breasts of exceptionally devout people. I know you know a lot of this," he added abruptly, apparently reading something in my expression, "but I'm not going to get my knee off your chest until you'll admit that I'm at least capable of taking a thing like this into consideration and tracking it down."

"I never saw you before in my life," I said, and in an important way I meant it. "Good," he said, with considerable relief. "Now I'll tell you what I did. I jumped at this doll episode almost as wildly as you did. It came late in the questioning because apparently it really didn't matter to Hal."

"Oh, well, but the subconscious —"

"Shaddup!" He stuck a surprisingly sharp forefinger into my collarbone. "I'm telling you; you're not telling me. I won't disallow that a deep belief in voodoo might be hidden in Hal's subconscious, but if it is,

it's where sodium amyltal and word association and light and profound hypnosis and a half-dozen other therapies give not a smidgin of evidence. I'll take that as proof that he carries no such conviction. I guess from the looks of you I'll have to remind you again that I've dug into this thing in more ways for longer and with more tools than you have, — and I doubt that it means any less to me than it does to you."

"You know, I'm just going to shut up," I said plaintively.

"High time," he said, and grinned. "Now, in every case of voodoo damage or death, there has to be that element of devout belief in the powers of the witch or wizard, and through it a complete sense of identification with the doll. In addition, it helps if the victim knows what sort of damage the doll is sustaining — crushing, or pins sticking into it, or what. And you can take my word for it that no such news has reached Hal."

"What about the doll? Just to be absolutely sure, shouldn't we get it back?"

"I thought of that. But there's no way I know of getting it back without making it look valuable to the woman. And if she thinks it's valuable to Hal, we'll never see it."

"Hm. Who is she, and what's her royal gripe?"

"She's as nasty a piece of fluff as they come. She got involved with Hal for a little while — nothing serious, certainly not on his part. He was . . . he's a big, good-natured kid who thinks the only evil people around are the ones who get killed at the end of the movie. Kelley was at sea at the time and he blew in to find this little vampire taking Hal for everything she could, first by sympathy, then by threats. The old badger game. Hal was just bewildered. Kelley got his word that nothing had occurred between them, and then forced Hal to lower the boom. She called his bluff and it went to court. They forced a physical examination on her and she got laughed out of court. She wasn't the mother of anyone's unborn child. She never will be. She swore to get even with him. She's without brains or education or

resources, but that doesn't stop her from being pathological. She sure can hate."

"Oh. You've seen her."

Milton shuddered. "I've seen her. I tried to get all Hal's gifts back from her. I had to say all because I didn't dare itemize. All I wanted, it might surprise you to know, was that damned doll. Just in case, you know . . . although I'm morally convinced that the thing has nothing to do with it. Now do you see what I mean about a single example of unreason?"

"Fraid I do," I felt upset and sat upon and I wasn't fond of the feeling. I've read just too many stories where the scientist just hasn't the imagination to solve a haunt. It had been great, feeling superior to a bright guy like Milton.

We walked out of there and for the first time I felt the mood of a night without feeling that an author was ramming it down my throat for story purposes. I looked at the clean-swept, star-reaching cubism of the Radio City area and its living snakes of neon, and I suddenly thought of an Evelyn Smith story the general idea of which was "After they found out the atom bomb was magic, the rest of the magicians who enchanted refrigerators and washing machines and the telephone system came out into the open." I felt a breath of wind and wondered what it was that had breathed. I heard the snoring of the city and for an awesome second felt it would roll over, open its eyes, and . . . speak.

On the corner I said to Milton, "Thanks. You've given me a thumping around. I guess I needed it." I looked at him. "By the Lord I'd like to find some place where you've been stupid in this thing."

"I'd be happy if you could," he said seriously.

I whacked him on the shoulder. "See? You take all the fun out of it."

He got a cab and I started to walk. I walked a whole lot that night, just anywhere. I thought about a lot of things. When I got home the phone was ringing. It was Kelley.

I'm not going to give you a blow-by-blow of that talk with Kelley. It was in that small front room of his place — an apartment he'd rented after Hal got sick, and not the

one Hal used to have — and we talked the night away. All I'm withholding is Kelley's expression of things you already know: that he was deeply attached to his brother, that he had no hope left for him, that he would find who or what was responsible and deal with it his way. It is a strong man's right to break down if he must, with whom and where he chooses, and such an occasion is only an expression of strength. But when it happens in a quiet place, with the command of hope strongly in the air; when a chest heaves and a throat must be held wide open to sob silently so that the dying one shall not know; these things are not so pleasant to describe in detail. Whatever my ultimate feelings for Kelley, his emotions and the expressions of them are for him to keep.

He did, however, know the name of the girl and where she was. He did not hold her responsible. I thought he might have a suspicion, but it turned out to be only a certainty that this was no disease, no subjective internal disorder. If a great hate and a great determination could solve the problem, Kelley would solve it. If research and logic could solve it, Milton would do it. If I could do it, I would.

She was checking hats in a sleazy club out where Brooklyn and Queens, in a remote meeting, agree to be known as Long Island. The contact was easy to make. I gave her my spring coat with the label outward. It's a good label. When she turned away with it I called her back and drunkenly asked her for the bill in the right-hand pocket. She found it and handed it to me. It was a hundred. "Damn taxis never got change," I mumbled and took it before her astonishment turned to sleight-of-hand. I got out my wallet, crowded the crumpled note into it clumsily enough to display the two other C-notes, there, shoved it into the front of my jacket so that it missed the pocket and fell to the floor, and walked off. I walked back before she could lift the hinged counter and skin out after it. I picked it up and smiled foolishly at her. "Lose more business cards that way," I said. Then I brought her into focus. "Hey, you know, you're cute."

I suppose "cute" is one of the four-letter words that describe her. "What's your name?"

"Charity," she said. "But don't get ideas." She was wearing so much pancake makeup that I couldn't tell what her complexion was. She leaned so far over the counter that I could see lipstick stains on her brassiere.

"I don't have a favorite charity yet," I said. "You work here all time?"

"I go home once in a while," she said. "What time?"

"One o'clock."

"Tell you what," I confided, "Let's both be in front of this place at a quarter after and see who stands who up, okay?" Without waiting for an answer I stuck the wallet into my back pocket so that my jacket hung on it. All the way into the dining room I could feel her eyes on it like two hot glistening broiled mushrooms. I came within an ace of losing it to the head waiter when he collided with me, too.

She was there all right, with a yellowish fur around her neck and heels you could have driven into a pine plank. She was up to the elbows in jangly brass and chrome, and when we got into a cab she threw herself on me with her mouth open. I don't know where I got the reflexes, but I threw my head down and cracked her in the cheekbone with my forehead, and when she squeaked indignantly I said I'd dropped the wallet again and she went about helping me find it quietly as you please. We went to a place and another place and an after-hours place, all her choice. They served her sherry in her whiskey-ponies and doubled all my orders, and tilted the checks something outrageous. Once I tipped a waiter eight dollars and she palmed the five. Once she wormed my leather notebook out of my breast pocket thinking it was the wallet, which by this time was safely tucked away in my knit shorts. She did get one enamel cuff link with a rhinestone in it, and my fountain pen. All in all it was quite a duel. I was loaded to the eyeballs with thiamin hydrochloride and caffeine citrate, but a most respectable amount of alcohol

soaked through them, and it was all I could do to play it through. I made it, though, and blocked her at every turn until she had no further choice but to take me home. She was furious and made only the barest attempts to hide it.

We got each other up the dim dawnlit stairs, shushing each other drunkenly, both much soberer than we acted, each promising what we expected not to deliver. She negotiated her lock successfully and waved me inside.

I hadn't expected it to be so neat. Or so cold. "I didn't leave that window open," she said complainingly. She crossed the room and closed it. She pulled her fur around her throat. "This is awful."

It was a long low room with three windows. At one end, covered by a venetian blind, was a kitchenette. A door at one side of it was probably a bathroom.

She went to the venetian blind and raised it. "Have it warmed up in a jiffy," she said.

I looked at the kitchenette. "Hey," I said as she lit the little oven, "Coffee. How's about coffee?"

"Oh, all right," she said glumly. "But talk quiet, huh?"

"Sh-h-h-h." I pushed my lips around with a forefinger. I circled the room. Cheap phonograph and records. Small-screen TV. A big double studio-couch. A bookcase with no books in it, just china dogs. It occurred to me that her unsuitable approach was probably not successful as often as she might wish.

But where was the thing I was looking for?

"Hey, I wanna powder my nose," I announced.

"In there," she said. "Can't you talk quiet?"

I went into the bathroom. It was tiny. There was a foreshortened tub with a circular frame over it from which hung a horribly cheerful shower curtain, with big red roses. I closed the door behind me and carefully opened the medicine chest. Just the usual. I closed it carefully so it wouldn't click. A built-in shelf held towels.

Must be a closet in the main room, I thought. Hatbox, trunk, suitcase, maybe.

Where would I put a devil-doll if I were hewing someone?

I wouldn't hide it away, I answered myself. I don't know why, but I'd sort of have it out in the open somehow.

I opened the shower curtain and let it close. Round curtain, square tub.

"Yup!" I pushed the whole round curtain back, and there in the corner, just at eye level, was a triangular shelf. Grouped on it were four figurines, made apparently from kneaded wax. Three had wisps of hair fastened by candle-droppings. The fourth was hairless, but had slivers of a horny substance pressed into the ends of the arms. Fingernail parings.

I stood for a moment thinking. Then I picked up the hairless doll, turned to the door. I checked myself, flushed the toilet, took a towel, shook it out, dropped it over the edge of the tub. Then I reeled out. "Hey honey, look what I got, ain't it cute?" "Shh!" she said. "Oh for crying out loud. Put that back, will you?"

"Well, what is it?" "It's none of your business, that's what it is. Come on, put it back."

I wagged my finger at her. "You're not being nice to me," I complained.

She pulled some shreds of patience together with an obvious effort. "It's just some sort of toys I have around. Here."

I snatched it away. "All right, you don't wanna be nice!" I whipped my coat together and began to button it clumsily, still holding the figurine.

She sighed, rolled her eyes, and came to me. "Come on, Dadsy. Have a nice cup of coffee and let's not fight." She reached for the doll and I snatched it away again.

"You got to tell me," I pouted.

"It's pers'nal."

"I wanna be personal," I pointed out.

"Oh all right," she said. "I had a roommate one time, she used to make these things. She said you make one, and s'pose I decide I don't like you, I get something of yours, hair or toenails or something. Say your name is George. What is your name?"

"George," I said.

"All right, I call the doll George. Then I

stick pins in it. That's all. Give it to me."

"Who's this one?"

"That's Al."

"Hal?"

"Al. I got one called Hal. He's in there. I hate him the most."

"Yeah, huh. Well, what happens to Al and George and all when you stick pins in 'em?"

"They're s'posed to get sick. Even die."

"Do they?"

"Nah," she said with immediate and complete candor. "I told you, it's just a game, sort of. If it worked believe me old Al would bleed to death. He runs the delicatessen." I handed her the doll, and she looked at it pensively. "I wish it did work, sometimes. Sometimes I almost believe in it. I stick 'em and they just yell."

"Introduce me," I demanded.

"What?"

"Introduce me," I said. I pulled her toward the bathroom. She made a small irritated "Oh-h," and came along.

"This is Fritz and this is Bruno and — where's the other one?"

"What other one?"

"Maybe he fell behind the — Down back of —" She knelt on the edge of the tub and leaned over to the wall, to peer behind it. She regained her feet, her face red from effort and anger. "What are you trying to pull? You kidding around or something?"

I spread my arms. "What do you mean?"

"Come on," she said between her teeth. She felt my coat, my jacket. "You hid it some place."

"No I didn't. There was only four." I pointed. "Al and Fritz and Bruno and Hal. Which one's Hal?"

"That's Freddie. He give me twenty bucks and took twenty three out of my purse, the dirty —. But Hal's gone. He was the best one of all. You sure you didn't hide him?"

"The window!" she said, and ran into the other room. I was on my four bones peering under the tub when I understood what she meant. I took a last good look around and then followed her. She was standing at the window, shading her eyes and peering out. "What do you know? Imagine somebody would swipe a thing

like that!"

A sick sense of loss was born in my solar plexus.

"Aw, forget it. I'll make another one for that Hal. But I'll never make another one that ugly," she added wistfully. "Come on, the coffee's — what's the matter? You sick? You look bad, Hal."

"Yeah," I said, "I'm sick."

"Of all the things to steal," she said from the kitchenette. "Who do you suppose would do such a thing?"

Suddenly I knew who would. I cracked my fist into my palm and laughed.

"What's the matter, you crazy?"

"Yes," I said. "You got a phone?"

"No. Where you going?"

"Out. Goodbye, Charity."

"Hey, now wait, honey. Just when I got coffee for you."

I snatched the door open. She caught my sleeve. "You can't go away like this. How's about a little something for Charity?"

"You'll get yours when you make the rounds tomorrow, if you don't have a hangerover from those sherry highballs," I said cheerfully. "And don't forget the five you swiped from the tip-plate. Better watch out for that waiter, by the way. I think he saw you do it."

"You're not drunk!" she gasped.

"You're not a witch," I grinned. I blew her a kiss and ran out.

I shall always remember her like that, round-eyed, a little more astonished than she was resentful, the beloved dollar-signs fading from her hot brown eyes, the pathetic, useless little twitch of her hips she summoned up as a last plea.

Ever try to find a phone booth at five a.m.? I half-trotted nine blocks before I found a cab, and I was on the Queens side of the Triboro Bridge before I found a gas station open.

I dialed. The phone said, "Hello?" "Kelley!" I roared happily. "Why didn't you tell me? You'd a saved me sixty bucks worth of the most dismal fun I ever —"

"This is Milton," said the telephone.

"Hal just died."

My mouth was still open and I guess it just stayed that way. Anyway it was cold

inside when I closed it. "I'll be right over."
"Better not," said Milton. His voice was shaking with incomplete control. "Unless you really want to. . . there's nothing you can do, and I'm going to be . . . busy."

"Where's Kelley?" I whispered.
"I don't know."
"Well," I said. "Call me."
I got back into my taxi and went home. I don't remember the trip.

Sometimes I think I dreamed I saw Kelley that morning.

A lot of alcohol and enough emotion to kill it, mixed with no sleep for thirty hours, makes for blackout. I came up out of it reluctantly, feeling that this was no kind of world to be aware of. Not today.

I lay looking at the bookcase. It was very quiet. I closed my eyes, turned over, burrowed into the pillow, opened my eyes again and saw Kelley sitting in the easy chair, poured out in his relaxed feline fashion, legs too long, arms too long, eyes too long and only partly open.

I didn't ask him how he got in because he was already in, and welcome. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to be the one to tell him about Hal. And besides I wasn't awake yet. I just lay there.

"Milton told me," he said. "It's all right."

I nodded.
Kelley said, "I read your story. I found some more and read them too. You got a lot of imagination."

He hung a cigarette on his lower lip and lit it. "Milton, he's got a lot of knowledge. Now, both of you think real good up to a point. Then too much knowledge presses him off to the no'theast. And too much imagination squeezes you off to the no'thwest."

He smoked a while.
"Me, I think straight through but it takes me a while."

I palmed my eyeballs. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's okay," he said quietly. "Look, I'm goin' after what killed Hal."

I closed my eyes and saw a vicious, pretty, empty little face. I said "I was most of the night with Charity."

"Were you now?"
"Kelley," I said, "If it's her you're after,

forget it. She's a sleazy little tramp but she's also a little kid who never had a chance. She didn't kill Hal."

"I know she didn't. I don't feel about her one way or the other. I know what killed Hal, though, and I'm goin' after it the only way I know for sure."

"All right then," I said. I let my head dig back into the pillow. "What did kill him?"
"Milton told you about that doll Hal gave her."

"He told me. There's nothing in that, Kelley. For a man to be a voodoo victim, he's got to believe that —"

"Yeh, yeh, yeh. Milt told me. For hours he told me."

"Well, all right."

"You got imagination," Kelley said sleepily. "Now just imagine along with me a while. Milt tell you how some folks, if you point a gun at 'em and go bang, they drop dead, even if there was only blanks in the gun?"

"He didn't, but I read it somewhere. Same general idea."

"Now imagine all the shootings you ever heard of was like that, with blanks."

"Go ahead."

"You got a lot of evidence, a lot of experts, to prove about this believing business, ever' time anyone gets shot."

"Got it."

"Now imagine somebody shows up with live ammunition in his gun. Do you think those bullets going to give a damn who believes what?"

I didn't say anything.

"For a long time people been makin' dolls and stickin' pins in 'em. Wherever somebody believes it can happen, they get it. Now suppose somebody shows up with the doll all those dolls was copied from. The real one."

I lay still.

"You don't have to know nothin' about it," said Kelley lazily. "You don't have to understand how it works. Nobody has to believe nothing. All you do, you just point it where you want it to work."

"Point it how?" I whispered.

He shrugged. "Call the doll by a name. Hate it, maybe."

"For God's sake's, Kelley, you're crazy!

Why, there can't be anything like that!"

"You eat a steak," Kelley said, "How you got know what to take and what to pass? Do you know?"

"Some people know."

"You don't. But your gut does. So there's lots of natural laws that are goin' to work whether anyone understands 'em or not. Lots of sailors take a trick at the wheel without knowin' how a steering engine works. Well, that's me. I know where I'm goin' and I know I'll get there. What do I care how does it work, or who believes what?"

"Fine, so what are you going to do?"

"Get what got Hal." His tone was just as lazy but his voice was very deep, and I knew when not to ask any more questions. Instead I said, with a certain amount of annoyance, "Why tell me?"

"Want you to do something for me."

"What?"

"Don't tell no one what I just said for a while. And keep something for me."

"What? And for how long?"

"You'll know."

I'd have risen up and roared at him if he had not chosen just that second to get up and drift out of the bedroom. "What gets me," he said quietly from the other room, "is I could have figured this out six months ago."

I fell asleep straining to hear him go out. He moves quieter than any big man I ever saw.

It was afternoon when I awoke. The doll was sitting on the mantelpiece glaring at me. Ugliest thing ever happened.

I saw Kelley at Hal's funeral. He and Milt and I had a somber drink afterward. We didn't talk about dolls. Far as I know Kelley shipped out right afterward. You assume that seamen do, when they drop out of sight. Milton was as busy as a doctor, which is very. I left the doll where it was for a week or two, wondering when Kelley was going to get around to his project. He'd probably call for it when he was ready. Meanwhile I respected his request and told no one about it. One day when some people were coming over I showed it in the top shelf of the closet, and somehow it just got left there.

About a month afterward I began to notice the smell. I couldn't identify it right away; it was too faint; but whatever it was, I didn't like it. I traced it to the closet, and then to the doll. I took it down and sniffed it. My breath exploded out. It was that same smell a lot of people wish they could forget — what Milton called necrotic flesh. I came within an inch of pitching the filthy thing down the incinerator, but a promise is a promise. I put it down on the table, where it slumped repulsively. One of the legs was broken above the knee. I mean it seemed to have two knee joints. And it was somehow puffy, sick-looking.

I had an old bell-jar somewhere that once had a clock in it. I found it and a piece of inlaid linoleum, and put the doll under the jar so I could at least live with it.

I worked and saw people — dinner with Milton, once — and the days went by the way they do, and then one night it occurred to me to look at the doll again.

It was in pretty sorry shape. I'd tried to keep it fairly cool, but it seemed to be melting and running all over. For a moment I worried about what Kelley might say, and then I heartily damned Kelley and put the whole mess down in the cellar.

And I guess it was altogether two months after Hal's death that I wondered why I'd assumed Kelley would have to call for the little horror before he did what he had to do. He said he was going to get what got Hal, and he intimated that the doll was that something.

Well, that doll was being got, but good. I brought it up and put it under the light. It was still a figurine, but it was one unholy mess. "Attaboy, Kelley," I gloated. "Go get 'em, kid."

Milton called me up and asked me to meet him at Rudy's. He sounded pretty bad. We had the shortest drink yet.

He was sitting in the back booth chewing on the insides of his cheeks. His lips were gray and he slopped his drink.

"What in time happened to you?" I gasped.

He gave me a ghastly smile. "I'm famous," he said. I heard his glass chatter against his teeth. He said, "I called in so many consultants on Hal Kelley that I'm

supposed to be an expert on — on that . . . condition." He forced his glass back to the table with both hands and held it down. He tried to smile and I wished he wouldn't. He stopped trying and almost whimpered, "I can't nurse one of 'em like that again."

"You going to tell me what happened?" I asked harshly. That works sometimes.

"Oh, oh yes. Well they brought in a . . . another one. At General. They called me in. Just like Hal. I mean exactly like Hal. Only I won't have to nurse this one, no I won't. I won't have to. She died six hours after she arrived."

"She?"

"She just said the same thing over and over every time anyone talked to her. They'd say, 'What happened?' or 'Who did this to you?' or 'What's your name?' and she'd say 'He called me Dolly.' That's all she'd say, just 'He called me Dolly.'"

I got up. "Bye, Milt."

He looked stricken. "Don't go, will you, you just got —"

"I got to go," I said. I didn't look back. I

had to get out and ask myself some questions. Think.

Who's guilty of murder, I asked myself, the one who pulls the trigger, or the gun?

I thought of a poor damn pretty empty little face with greedy hot brown eyes, and what Kelley said, "I don't care about her."

I thought, when she was twisting and breaking and sticking, how did it look to the doll? Bet she never even wondered about that.

I thought, action: A girl throws a fan at a man. Reaction: The man throws the girl at the fan. Action: A wheel sticks on a shaft. Reaction: Knock the shaft out of the wheel. Situation: We can't get inside. Resolution: Take the outside off it.

How do you kill a doll?

Who's guilty, the one who pulls the trigger, or the gun?

"He called me Dolly."

When I got home the phone was ringing.

"Hi," said Kelley.

I said, "It's all gone. The doll's all gone."

"All right," said Kelley. ●

Theodore Sturgeon

This gentle philosopher's writing transcends any labels and represents one of the most unique contributions to the field of science fiction, as nebulous and confining as that label seems today. His exploration of the human condition has been far reaching, extraordinary and supremely original. Readers are manipulated into new "ways of thinking" through seemingly effortless storytelling that is, in fact, contrived to do just that. Sturgeon has used the freedom of the sci genre to suggest avenues of tolerance for so-called normal people toward so-called abnormal ones. Perhaps his most famous work is *More Than Human* (International Fantasy Award, 1954), a novel consisting of three connected stories, two new pieces built around "Baby is Three", originally published in *Galaxy* in 1952. *More Than Human* is a fascinating tale about six "misfits" who join to form an evolved form of humanity — a gestalt being. This idea is carried further in *The Cosmic Rape* where

a hive-mind alien absorbs all of mankind to form a more highly developed single being. Sturgeon examines varying acceptable possibilities for human sexuality in "The World Well Lost" (homosexuality); "If all Men Were Brothers, Would You Let Your Sister Marry One?" (incest); *Venus Plus X* (hermaphrodites); and *Some of Your Blood* (vampiric sexuality). He is currently working on a big, non-science fiction novel, *Godbody*. Be sure to read his sensitive and entertaining book reviews in *Twilight Zone Magazine*. — EM



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Steven Ray Daugherty

Comnet 2 Enters the 21st Century

So God (aka J. Wellington Colvert Throckmorton the IV, President, ComNet 2) calls the Savior (aka Big Tom Gaston, Director of Programming, ComNet 2) into his office and says unto him, "T.G., I'm going to have to put your butt square on the line. I need a monster hit for the barracuda; got it, T.G.? I'm talking Saturday morning, Big Tom."

T.G.'s wheels are already spinning, but he buys time with a token protest. "What about 'Slum Funnies,' Chief? Sure, we got started slow, but hey. It's up to 29 this week."

"29 isn't good enough," snaps God predictably. "I won't be satisfied with anything less than Top Ten, T.G. And don't use the patent ban argument on me again, either. There's no reason our PolySense rep shouldn't be every bit the equal of ComNet 1, and I want a show to prove it!"

But his snarl softens, and he leans over his desk and whispers confidentially, "To tell the truth, Big Tom, World Sugar is killing me on our barracuda ratings. 'Course, so is the Social Control Board, which proves you can't win." His face hardens again. "I want a proposal on my desk by Friday, 5 o'clock. Got it, T.G.? Or it's your butt."

God punches a button on his phone bank violently. Gaston correctly deduces the meeting is over. "Got it, Chief!" he oozes. "And may I say it's a great idea!"

So the Savior calls in his braintrust (Tim Dorfman, Studio Coordinator; Alex Robinson, Chief of the Scriptwriters Pool; Sylvia Jackson, Director of Market Research; and Little Tom, Executive Gopher) and demands ideas.

"All right, kids," he explains smoothly and confidently, even though his eyes are desperate with professional panic, "let's noodle this one out. For starters, what sells the SCB?"

Sylvia Jackson rises dramatically from her seat, then leans dramatically on the air conditioner, oblivious that the Savior's eyes are closed. "T.G., Sylvia Jackson here. I'd say for openers, a clear distinction between Good and Bad. Re: CFR 182:1199.12 (a)(1). One thing you have to say for Sylvia, her staff does

its homework.

"T.G., Tim Dorfman here, and enjoying the challenge, I'd like to add." The butt does not exist that Dorfman wouldn't kiss on his road to The Top. "Let me piggyback on Syl's cite, and a dynamite cite I might say. New pending regs, boss: no live sex, and a minimum of actual sugar odor."

"That'll never stay in the final regs!" Sylvia protests vehemently. "The lobbyists'll kill those proposals!" If looks were neutron bombs, half of Manhattan would be an empty shell, with Dorfman at Ground Zero.

But Alex Robinson is breathing hard, and the Savior knows from experience to open his eyes when that happens. Alex is close to swooning, and he points weakly to his secretary (sitting discreetly behind him) to take notes. "T.G., Alex Robinson here," he croaks. "Stipulated, kids relate to a *fun* kind of guy, a guy with lots of great prizes at his disposal." Alex slides out of his chair, his knees buckling as they collide with the back of Little Tom, who is kneeling under the desk in order to service his boss. (No kidding, it's a jungle out there.) But good old Alex never misses a beat.

"But he's an authoritarian figure, too. A *fun* authoritarian figure. Leading a crusade against all the stupid things little boys and girls do. He's like Father Christmas and the All-Seeing Eye at the same time. We'll need a form of negative reinforcement to go along with the swell prizes, of course."

Alex is stretched out on the carpet, his fingers twitching. Gaston smiles. It's a good sign.

"Big Eddie . . . Fast Eddie . . . Eat 'Em Up Eddie . . . oh my god: Laser Eddie, **LASER EDDIE!** That's it! Got it, Edith?" Alex' secretary writes "Laser Eddie" on her pad in stenoscopic ten times, very carefully.

"It does roll off the tongue nicely," conceded Dorfman, seeing his boss's look of preliminary approval. "But what negative reinforcement will he wield?"

"His staff can noodle that out later," Gaston snaps coldly, thinking: well Dorfman's failed again. And Dorfman knows it. He tries to recoup his losses with a supplemental idea to piggyback on Alex' brainstorm, but Gaston is not interested. "I need a proposal on my desk by Friday morning, 9 o'clock," he orders, his hand waving over his braintrust like a benediction. "Or it's your butt."

Wheels turn, gratingly at first with the grinding sound of rusty gears, then smoother and smoother, and faster and faster, and within two hours, ComNet 2 (officially chartered as a public interest media complex corporation under the rules of the Federal Television Administration; soon to be renamed the Federal Holography Administration, and the Federal Bureau of Minority Opinion, with official sign-offs from the National Educators Union, the Gay Rights Advisory Commission, and the Commissioner of Football) is cranked up and cooking repeat cooking!

Sure, ComNet 2's having a little trouble in the ratings, but hey. These are the guys who came up with the "Commercial Hall of Shame," the prime time weeper "Jerusalem" (with the question that left 'em hanging for over a year: "Who crucified J.C.?"), the phenomenal game show "Screw You," and who can ever forget Wednesday Morning Football? Problem is, times keep changing, and the patent ban almost put ComNet 2 out of business, even though the wizards down in TechDiv had come up with the technology for

holographic transmission (or "PolySense," as the boys in Sylvia's shop had renamed it) independently of ComNet 1, and only a couple of months later.

But the legal beagles managed to get an injunction against the patent ban, so it looks like ComNet 2 is back in business. Except ComNet 1 is marketing their shows as "The Original, and in your heart you know it's The Best," naturally.

Well, the Savior never goes down without a fight, so he calls in his braintrust, after a good talking-to from God, and that brings us up to Saturday morning, 5:30. Like we said, ComNet 2 works fast.

COMNET 2
OFFICIAL PROGRAMMING GUIDE
SATURDAY OCTOBER 10, 2009

Midnight The Yesterday Show with Gary Coleman (news)

12:45 A.M. All-Night Movie #1: "The Zombie People Return" (1988)

3:00 A.M. All-Night Movie #2: "Truckers in Space" (2000)

5:00 A.M. Slum Funnies (cartoon)

5:30 A.M. Laser Eddie (children's amusement)

6:30 A.M. Opium Funnies (cartoon)

7:00 A.M. Saturday Morning Football: Kinasha (4-2) v. U.S. Senate (1-5) (sports)

10:00 A.M. Screw You (game show)

11:00 A.M. Bang, Bang! You're Dead! (game show)

Noon The President Speaks to You (weekly call-in)

1:00 P.M. The Commissioner of Football Speaks to You (weekly educational feature)

2:00 P.M. Praise Jesus and Send Your Checks (telethon and call-in)

6:00 P.M. Dune (science fiction serial)

6:30 P.M. Local News/Local News/Local News/Local News/

7:00 P.M. A World In Crisis (national news) [captioned for the illiterate]

8:00 P.M. World Sugar Playhouse: "A Girl and Her Leather" (made for holo) (drama)

11:00 P.M. Saturday Night Football: Houston (1-5) v. Hollywood (6-0) (sports)

IT IS SATURDAY morning, 5:30. Millions of barracuda all over the world are creeping down the stairs, oh so quietly in order not to wake mom and dad (or mom and mom, or dad and dad, depending), switching on the holo.

At first there is only a mottled crossbeam of hot white light. Then a body materializes in millions of living rooms, a tiny ephemeris lugging a portable fusion power plant behind him. Millions of barracuda turn up the gain.

"Hey, kids," shouts the ephemeris, "what time is it?"

"IT'S LASER EDDIE TIME AND LOOK OUT OR YOU'LL GET YOUR ASS FLAMED!!!" a hundred happy voices cheer in Studio C. Tom Gaston watches nervously on the monitor screen. It's his butt.

"That's right!" beams Laser Eddie. He tugs proudly at the mike clipped to his collar. "And who'll be our first little boy or girl to play the Game of Life this fine morning?"

A hundred eager little hands shoot up, and a random little boy is chosen. He squeals with insane pleasure and scurries up toward the stage where Laser Eddie is standing. A platoon of white-smocked technicians flank him, wielding the modern doomsday weapons of sophisticated media war — vidcams, tape recs, olfrecs, espmags, A-44's (haptic electrodes), and gustsynths.

(Now, there is a story they tell of the time when "Bozo the Clown" was taped live on WGN-TV in Chicago. This is back in the days of twin-sense, pre-holo, even pre-color, "television." A little streetwise blood from Southside says the four-letter word one does not say in front of the inviolate Bozo upon losing some meaningless contest. Bozo, realizing this kid is a well-meaning ghetto product who can hardly be blamed for the genetic factors producing his uncontrollably filthy mouth, reminds him firmly, "Now, that's a Bozo no-no." To which the blood returns, "Aw, cram it, clown." Well, perhaps you had to be there, but in Chicago, this incident has taken on the proportions of a folk legend. More on this later.)

Anyway, the little boy leaps onto the stage and shakes hands solemnly with Laser Eddie. "And what is your name, little fellow?" asks Laser Eddie.

"Teddy Anderson!" squeaks the awestruck boy. The lights are incredibly hot, and Laser Eddie's smile is so dazzling.

"Well, little Teddy Anderson, let's just get you all hooked up here so all the little boys and girls out in hololand can enjoy the Game of Life right along with you." The platoon of technicians attach the electrodes and receptors and electromagnets and mikes and synthesizers and wires to the little boy, while Program Director Sylvio Carrasquel switches smoothly to a commercial for World Sugar.

When the commercial fades from the monitor screen to be replaced with a zoom shot of himself, little Teddy begins to get scared, but Laser Eddie's calmly excited voice reassures him with a recitation of the rules. No doubt about it, Laser Eddie is a pro.

"Okay, Teddy, take a look at those two curtains over there. Now, behind one of the curtains is an endless progression of pleasures, each one greater than the one before. You'll experience delights you've never dreamed of. But behind the

other curtain is an endless progression of pain, each one more agonizing than the one before. You'll experience miseries you've never conceived. Or . . . you can take this hundred dollar bill I'm holding in my hand right now!"

The barracuda in the peanut gallery scream their crazed advice, but it's a senseless jumble to little Teddy Anderson. The hysterical noise mounts, and the millions experiencing on PolySense hold their dilemma and agonize over the choice with him.

He almost reaches for the hundred dollar bill dangling deliciously in front of his face. After all, that would fetch him two Big Macs and a small shake! But he draws back and says in a very small but clear voice, "Curtain Number Two, please."

Well, the peanut gallery practically freaks out. Studio C rocks with the din. A beautiful woman poses sensually by Curtain Number Two. Laser Eddie prolongs the moment masterfully.

"So, Teddy," he says, just to make sure everyone from New York to Tokyo with an IQ of over 25 understands the gravity of the choice involved, "you want to take not Curtain Number One, and not the hundred dollar bill I'm holding right here in my very hand, but **WHATEVER MAY LIE BEHIND CURTAIN NUMBER TWO**, whether it be endless pleasure . . . or *endless agony*?"

Teddy swallows hard and nods. Several children in the peanut gallery swoon in excitement. A technician sprints onto the stage and gets Teddy's scrawled signature on a Federal Bureau of Juvenile Options-approved release form. Laser Eddie crooks a finger dramatically toward curtain number two, where the sensually-posing beautiful woman pulls on the dangling cord. The curtain opens, mists cunningly masking the wonders — or terrors — that may lie within. The little boy walks toward the murky orifice, first tentatively, then more determinedly.

Within the opening are not the plastic and wire trappings of a modern holography studio, nor the hysterical cheering of carefully-coached children, nor the dazzling smile of professionally-trained Laser Eddie, but something else entirely: shimmering mists, quiet nature-sounds, the soft grey hues of forever.

And then, in quick-fire progression, it begins:

1. *the pleasant smell of a bakery, aromas of rising dough, cinnamon, and vanilla wafting through the summer air, an olfactory siren*

- Sylvio slaps a switch, and the wonderful scenario vanishes, to be replaced by:
2. *the burstingly cold first taste of egg-rich vanilla ice cream, thick with chocolate syrup, icing his tongue like a polar sea with its overwhelming sweetness*

Teddy boggles at the goodness of it. The taste is prolonged for a second's eternity and does not relent until Sylvio slaps another switch, and the scenario is changed to:

3. *the nuzzle of a once-demure kitten, its purr barely audible, its nose warm and electric, its body more fluff than anything else*

The kitten burrows into Teddy's shoulder, and more than anything else in the world he wants the kitten to stay with him and never leave, but Carrasquel works his magic, and the next scenario pops up:

4. *the oven-warm sensation of spring's first sun on winter-chilled bones*

5. *tripping through a field of clouds, dancing on the feathery puffs, then leaping from a diveboard of cumulus, flying through a breezeless azure sky*
6. *everyday is Saturday, a feeling of utter, soul-filling relief, an eternity of present without future, no burdens, no worries, all chores behind*
7. *unending orgasm, the sweet, wet bursting dam the way it was the first time in a childhood dream, but unending now and skilled*
8. *the hurricane dance of the storm-guppies on Jupiter*
9. *multiple consciousness and perpetual exploration of undreamed levels of reality*

10. *the first realization of life after death, the disbelieving but fantastically real sensation of overflowing, unexpected relief that heaven exists; it is shouted and sung after a lifetime of fearing, not daring to hope that all does not end after the last breath; heaven is a simple desert oasis where the air shimmers and is cool, cool freedom and contentment in the breezy shadow of a swaying palm*

Oh, how Teddy grabs on and rides the magnificence! He prays it will last forever, but hey. Carrasquel is cooking now, absolutely outdoing himself. (It's his butt.) Like a master chef, he slaps the switch with a flourish and serves Teddy with the piece de resistance:

11. *being all the gods in history*

Cut! It's time for a message from World Sugar, and poor Teddy feels it all slip away from him like a dream. The beautiful woman leads him dazed back through the curtained opening and onto the stage, and the technicians unplug and unsnap the electrodes and receptors and electromagnets and mikes and synthesizers and wires from him. The children in the peanut gallery watch Teddy in awe and exhaustion, but it fades quickly for them and they cannot understand why Teddy slumps in a corner, his head twitching and a line of drool forming under his unmoving lips. The technology just isn't there yet for total, realistic PolySense transmission. Okay, it's good, but it's not what the holo sales pitches claim, not yet.

Besides, hey. This is the twenty-first century. These kids are jaded, they're ready for a new thrill.

"Stand by," calls Sylvio's lead transmission engineer, Bruno Stebbens. (You guessed it, it's his butt, too.)

Bruno flashes a finger as the commercial ends, and Laser Eddie's smile returns, bright enough to light a small city. As the vidcams, tape recs, olfrecs, espmags, A-44's, and gustsynths follow his every move, his every professional nuance, he strolls toward the twitching boy, dragging as always his portable fusion power plant behind him.

Laser Eddie's calm, confident, soothingly excited voice urges the boy's unfocused eyes open (that and 1000 cc of adrenalin discreetly pumped in Teddy's arm by a technician.) "Well, Teddy," oozes Laser Eddie, "what did you think of your prize for making the right choice?"

The peanut gallery hangs on every word.

Teddy now knows what was behind curtain number one. He had chosen wrong: what could be more hellish than to experience a progression of infinite pleasures, each more exquisite than the last, only to have it all yanked away from him, then to be flung back into his dull childhood reality?

He can remember nothing specific at all, only the incredible intensity of his sensations, his utter delirium at realizing each level even existed, the way he wallowed in the pleasures. Yet, there was one thing . . . when he was all the gods in history . . . after all, what is god but total knowledge? There is one, and oddly only one thing he remembers from being all the gods in history . . . even though some 10⁸⁸ bits of data passed through his god-mind in those few seconds. He suddenly grins wickedly. He doesn't know what caused that one datum to remain in his back-to-normal child-mind — although he could guess:

"Aw, cram it, clown."

The enraged Laser Eddie presses the button clipped to his tie, and the laser beam flicks out from the portable fusion power plant and neatly burns a dime-sized hole through Teddy's forehead.

Buzzers and lights go off at the Social Control Board. Regulation-writing computers are plugged in with frightening swiftness. This looks bad, real bad.

A great hierarchy of butt-burning ensues, a pyramid of flamed asses. First Bruno Stebbens by Sylvio Carrasquel, then Sylvio by his boss Tim Dorfman, who then reports for his ass-flaming — along with Sylvia Jackson, Alex Robinson, and even Little Tom for good measure — by Tom Gaston. And of course Gaston has prepared himself for a royal ass-flaming from God (including the famous "You'll Never Work In This Industry Again" promise), so imagine his surprise when, upon reporting to J. Wellington Colvert Throckmorton the IV's Beverly Hills mansion, he is given a case of liquor and a carton of weeds, then escorted poolside by a pair of scantily-clad beauties.

"Big Tom!" roars the old man by the pool. "Congratulations! They don't call you the Savior for nothing."

Gaston is confused. "I thought . . . I thought . . ." he babbles.

"You think too much," finishes God decidedly. "Have a drink." He pours Big Tom a triple Chivas.

"The Social Control Board didn't like the outright murder," God begins expansively, "but our overnight surveys showed that 94% of all parents of barracuda watching the show are in favor of the life-imitating choice between curtain number one and curtain number two and the hundred dollar bill. Nice touch, that, Tom."

God stops and lights his cigar. "You see, Tom, I've been in this business a long time, and I have found one inviolate truth: Top Ten ratings have no social consciousness."

"And Tom . . . 'Laser Eddie' made the Top Ten!"

Gaston nearly drops his drink. Tears are rolling down his face.

God sits back and examines his cigar. "Yes, Tom, all the kids are demanding more, more, more of Laser Eddie, and their parents are demanding more, more, more of the metaphorical Crossings at the Pathways of Life we present. And as for the Social Control Board — well, as long as the world's people are kept happy and distracted, and we do parents' jobs for them as competently as we've always done, then the bureaucracy isn't forced to justify its existence with corporate ass-flaming."

Ass-flaming! Big Tom leaps up. "But, Chief! We fired practically the whole staff!"

The President of ComNet 2 winked conspiratorially. "Don't worry, Tom.

They're replaceable. Competent staff are a dime a dozen, but ideas, Tom . . . great ideas are beyond price."

PROGRESS REPORT #1

submitted by Xumwort,
Muse (Trainee)

So anyway, the lunatic godling Rumor keeps spreading The Word that this Daugherty dude keeps a boxful of half-finished stories under the bed; he be under the yoke of Ole Man Writer's Block, you see.

Mountains of praise to You, Zub; you be the ace kingpin around this joint; but jeez, you wants to send some wimpy fairy muse with them fancy notions, so I says, "Sure, Daugherty needs help, but hey. What he needs for real is a strong-arm bad-ass macho muse to keep after his lazy butt." Exaltation heaped on You, Zub; you sends me, and here I is.

Well, it's been Hell City, precious Zub. I watches Daugherty dawn to dusk to dawn,

and I be needing a replacement Evil Eye soon. For real, if I let him go forty heartbeats, he be glazed on the tube when he should be pounding the keys.

However and nonetheless, humble Xumwort (aided by trusty Breathbomb, his #2 bat) learns Zub's sublime lessons well. Please to see attachment, "ComNet 2 etc." Zub's slave makes no sense of it, but the dude be promised thirty-two folders and sixty jinglers (U.S.) from Madam Misguided Editor.

Ecstasies piled endlessly on Zub: there be a Novel In Progress!

Duly submitted,

X (his mark)

Xumwort,
Muse (Trainee)
"In My Fist."

X/bb
att. (1)

Driven to Dance

there is a shadow in this small room
that does not move
but slowly turns the key
and I am standing in the doorway
like a bundle of tiny sparks confined in space.
Distant voices
beneath this gruesome spectre
call out
and I am turning
turning to face them
what is it they are discussing?
a large oil painting they have just completed
and the sound of their voices breaks
the gentle tapping of my canvas shoes.

— Edward Martindale

I Think, Therefore, I Live



EUGENE DICE

*My eyes stream with tears, because others disregard your law.
(Psalm 119, v. 136)*

It was the slope of the jaguar's stomach that was menacing. Sleekly tucked up to the steel, velvet covered haunches, and empty of food. Cliff Baresack watched it and knew it was about to spring. Scream? He wanted to shriek, tear the air apart with the sound of his fear. But he stood, and the beast sprung.

It was a glass wall — that's how he would describe it. He had just decided he would not resist, would go out with blood and dignity, when the big cat hit the wall, except there wasn't any wall. Nothing. Afterwards Baresack walked forward. He walked to, and through the spot where the cat was hurled to the ground, and felt nothing. It was the least of his concerns.

Floating. Something under him, like an invisible water bed holding him in air, carrying him to the edge of the "garden" and beyond, into a gray room. There was nothing but grayness, and then the lizards were at him crawling on his body, hovering above him like grotesque humming birds. They had no wings that he could see, and they were not birds. They were iguanas, or something like them, but smaller. Just as ugly, and wearing things. Some of them wore tiny bits of cloth on their splayed feet, robes on their shoulders. They probed and tickled him. Looking at his eyes and at each other, they lacked the quick movement of animals.

Then they were gone and the specimens were drawn from him. Without needles, blood came from an artery in a thin line. A string of red in the air, it coagulated in a glass tube that appeared in space to meet it. Urine and sperm followed, collected in the same way. He tried to speak, but only closed his eyes, and slept.

"Whatsis yalbet. Whatsis yalla bat."

The sounds came from nowhere, or from the inside of Baresack's own mind, and the floating iguana with the red slippers was watching him closely. Baresack had the distinct feeling that the strange sounds were originating with the lizard person, though it made no such indication.

"Who are you and what are you doing to me?" Baresack was screaming at the lizard now, the lizard person. That he was more than a lizard was made plain from the red slippers, the silver robe hanging from his pale green, wrinkled body, and the unmistakable dignity with which he moved. Baresack was alone in a small, glass room, a room with soft walls that he could only feel and not penetrate, and the red-shoed iguana floated outside. An instrument appeared in the room with him, coming right through the wall and hanging there. It had slots, and looked like a radio, but no sound came from it. Baresack did not touch it. "What do you

Illustrated by Gene Day

I THINK, THEREFORE, I LIVE 83

want with me?"

"Wada ya WENT wi mee. Wada ya WENT wi me." The sound came from nowhere again, but this time there was no mistaking it: something was repeating his own words, imitating the sound of his own voice. It raised the hair on the back of Cliff Baresack's ample neck.

He had awakened in the garden that was not a garden, the plastic plants turning off the highway, was fresh in his memory. The car had swerved and turned sideways to its motion, and then up. Crazy, it twisted, the steering wheel turning to jelly in his hands. There was no crash, but blinding light. Then coolness, a world without heat that lasted, penetrated to his bones and through them, turning them to powder, freeze-dried crystals of flesh. He was a string of light, an arrow of sparks singing through air, and then he awoke in the garden that was not a garden.

There were other animals too, most of which he recognized. Besides the jaguar there were monkeys, a dog, a cat, snakes, and lizards — thousands of lizards — but all of the earth variety, without clothes, and held by gravity as surely as he was.

Beyond the glass walls the sky was a crisp, green color, the occasional cloud nothing more than a web of thread high in the atmosphere. The vegetation was low, sparse and blue-black in color. The walls of his cage remained cool, and he had the feeling that there was not much heat in the outside air, though that was simply a guess. He was light, very light. He felt as though he could jump a mile. But try as he might, he could not float, nor did any of the other beasts who shared his simulated garden. Only the lizard men floated, and as to how they did it, he hadn't a clue. But this bit of strangeness was nothing compared to the growing realization that he was alive and well in a place that must be many millions of miles from home.

"What planet is this?" He was talking to Red Shoes again, who was now a daily visitor, hovering outside his glass cage. "What planet?"

"Not know."

They had been making some progress over the length of the past several days, and Red-Shoes was learning the language. The words, at any rate, were being sounded, but the concept of putting one's thoughts into those words was something that the lizard man was having difficulty with.

"I am feeling sad," said Baresack, slowly.

"Why sadness?" The words did not come from the radio-like instrument, but rather from the cage itself, from everywhere in the cage at the same time. It was like wearing stereo ear phones where the source of the sound was perceived as coming from the center of one's own head.

"You have taken my freedom, taken me from the ones I love."

"I still do not know freedom. Explain again." They had been over this ground before.

"Freedom is . . . If I am a bird, I want to fly. Flying is my natural condition. I have wings that want to bite into the air and lift me. You have taken my wings, put me in a box. My freedom is gone."

"Where did it go? We will search for it for you."

"It doesn't exist as an object. It's a condition, an ability to do things. . ."

"A noun, Baresack. You said it was a noun. Nouns are things." The voice was getting louder, and Red-Shoes was showing the signs of exasperation that signaled his need to rest.

"Speech tires this one," he said. "Stopping must be done to quiet this." He could talk for fifteen minutes or so at a time, and then he would leave, staying away the remainder of the short, alien day. Progress was slow. And Red-Shoes was developing an authentic, human type temper. He would sometimes fling Baresack around the cage in fits of pique. A force would lift him and shake him like a naughty child, and Baresack knew it was Red-Shoes doing it, though he didn't know how.

"Psycho-kinetic energy," Baresack said.

"No comprehension," said Red-Shoes. "I . . . do not understand you, Baresack." Red-Shoes was practicing putting words into sentences at every opportunity.

"You do things, move things with the force of your mind. Thinking it makes it happen."

"This is an obvious true thing you speak, Baresack."

"It's not obvious to me. I cannot. . . my people do not have such power. We must touch things to move them."

"But your fingers and toes, Baresack," said Red-Shoes, settling down on the top of the cage in a sure sign of impending fatigue, "you move those with the power of your mind, do you not?"

"Yes, but they're connected to each other. The brain sends an electrical signal along the nerves, and that makes the muscles contract. It's different. Can't you understand that?"

"But all things are connected to all things, and there is no difference."

"Of course there's a difference. Why can't you see it?"

Red-Shoes eyed him with his pale, yellow lizard eyes, and then began to move away, wrapping it up for another day. "The difference is in your primitive think power. You of the low beings will never see true existence." He was gone, and Baresack pondered his last words with a deep frown.

"Warm-smarts." That's the closest translation Red-Shoes could give to name his race of beings. Other words came later, but these remained with Baresack as the best name for the lizard men.

"You have a name for yourself," Baresack had said. "Something the others think when they address you alone?"

"Was this a question, Baresack?"

"Yes."

"But you did not begin with any of the question words: who, which, why. . ."

"Don't try to teach me my own language, Red-Shoes. Just answer the question."

"You break your own rules, and this is not good."

"You don't understand all the rules, but never mind that now. I asked you how you would say your own name."

"Red-Shoes is the name you gave to me — it is the only name I have in any language."

"I know that. What I'm asking is what the others think of when they address you with their thoughts. There must be some way for them to refer to you."

"It cannot. . . It cannot be rendered."

"Try."

"Would you give me orders, Baresack?"

"You're dodging the question, Red-Shoes. Why?"

"You are correct. I dodge. . . does this mean 'avoid'?"

"Yes, but you're still dodging."

"Yes. It is not good in our way of doing things to focus on one's self. It is forbidden in the ways of the Elders, but it is done. I feel bad to do it."

"You're embarrassed, aren't you?"

"I do not understand." The skin around Red-Shoes' eyes was growing darker.

"You are." And for the first time in a long, long time, Baresack laughed. Red-Shoes tried to interrupt, but it was uncontrollable, like a dam bursting, and Red-Shoes left in a huff.

The next day he pried it out of him: "Smooth One of the Light Eyes." That was his name. It quieted Baresack and set him to thinking. "Why is it you are quiet, Baresack? Are you going to make the strange choking noise again?" He still sounded miffed.

"No. I'm not going to laugh at such a beautiful name. It reminds me of the names of the Indians . . . the native Americans of my planet. They would take names like yours."

"What does Baresack indicate with this 'laugh'? Do not use new words on me."

"Now who's giving orders?"

It took a while, but Baresack explained the concept of laughter to Red-Shoes. His whole explanation of emotions and their expression seemed to take the entire attention of the lizard-man, the creature who remained Baresack's only contact with the strange race of beings who think of themselves as the Warm-Smarts.

"Why are you doing this?" It took him long enough, but Baresack finally realized that he hadn't put the question to him since he had taught Red-Shoes to speak.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean why am I here? Why was I kidnapped against my will and brought to this stinking hole of a planet?" His rising emotion seemed to interest Red-Shoes.

"You know, I can almost perceive your thoughts when your emotions run high. You have potential, Baresack."

"I'm not interested in my potential. I want an answer to my question."

"You should be interested. It is — how would you say it? — a matter of life or death to the welfare of your people." Red-Shoes was showing off his growing vocabulary. He looked almost smug, but Baresack was in no mood to bait him.

"What's a matter of life or death? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You. I am talking about you and the . . . the . . ." He was casting around for a word. "The rule," he finally said, looking smug again. "You and the rule." This

was something they had never spoken of before.

"What rule is there, Red-Shoes? You never told me about any rule."

"It was not for you to know. There was no compulsion." Past tense? Baresack did not like the sound of it.

"Explain yourself, Red-Shoes. Is there some kind of a test going on here? Is that what this is all about?"

"Test?" He seemed to ponder it. "Yes. . . I think you could say 'test.' The word fits as well as many in your strange system."

"What kind of test?"

"A test to judge. To judge you."

"Judge me for what, against what standard?"

"I am not the one who judges. Others, more . . . advanced, more old. They do the judgment."

"You're dodging again. What happens if I don't pass this test. What are the consequences?"

"Consequences?"

"Don't play dumb on me, Red-Shoes. You know what I'm talking about."

The lizard-man paused, floating languidly on his back as he often did when in a reflective mood. "It is strange that I have such hesitance. I pause because I do not want you to emote . . . to be upset. Can you explain that?"

"It's called friendship, you dumb bastard. You care for me. I've taught you a lot, and I think you like it."

"Hah!"

"What the hell was that? I thought you guys never laughed."

"You talk about my learning from you? That would make me laugh if anything could. But in all seriousness, Baresack, I do hesitate to upset you. What did you call this? Friendship? Yes, perhaps that." He began to drift away, lost in his own thoughts.

"Hold it. You can't leave yet."

Red-Shoes turned, still moving away. "I grow weary."

"What about the goddamn test! You were going to tell me what happens if I don't pass your mysterious test." The creature stopped in mid air, watching Baresack with his bulging, yellow eyes.

"If you do not pass?"

"Yes!"

"Then the rule would not apply, and you would cease. You, along with your race, and all creatures of your earth."

The next day Baresack was moved out of his small cage and back to the main "garden." He saw no other creatures there except for an occasional lizard. A day transpired, and then another, with no contact from Red-Shoes. Baresack stored up questions until he thought he would burst, and then he began screaming. He went to the edge of the enclosure and pounded his fists against the plastic membrane, screaming for Red-Shoes, cursing him. Soon the air was filled with flying lizard-men, floating outside the enclosure, watching him, looking at each other significantly. He was breaking down, falling apart. He didn't care.

Cliff Baresack was a lawyer. He hustled his wares with a small firm in Lan-

caster, Pa., where he was a member of the Lion's Club, the Rotary, the J.C.'s, and Businessmen for a Balanced Budget. He was secretary of the last-named, and all any of them got him so far was one will and the chance to give loads of free advice. He could be in New York, he often told himself, just like many of his Harvard classmates, pulling down thirty thou' per in their second year of practice, and not going to Lion's Club meetings the second and fourth Wednesday of every month. Yes . . . he could be in the Big Apple, busting his hump in a library sixty-five hours a week, sweating for partnership in ten, maybe fifteen years. And then? A house at the shore, his family in tatters, his wife long gone in search of someone human? It wasn't any better.

Maybe a government job, he told himself. I could ease down to a nice steady salary, plenty of benefits, fifteen days paid vacation, every holiday ever conceived . . . Flag Day would find him sipping scotch, a black steak scorching on the grill, kids rolling in the grass. Or maybe doing a nice little private practice on the side . . .

It was at that point in his daydream that the steering wheel started to go loopy on him, and his V.W. bus began to come apart.

"There is some interest in you, Barendsack. That little display of emotion was felt by every think-doer in the area." Barendsack was back in his cage, floating on the invisible water bed, his arms restrained at his sides. He had just awakened and was watching Red-Shoes in his familiar location, floating above the tank.

"Ah, the think-doers. Got their attention, did it?"

"To say the least."

"And what in bloody hell is a 'think-doer'?"

"Profanity, Barendsack? And I thought you would be calmed down by this time. Shall I put you to sleep again?"

"No. I want to talk to you." He began struggling against the invisible bindings. "Get me down from this thing!"

"There is no 'thing,' Barendsack. It is only me holding you." Barendsack felt himself being gently lowered to the ground, the pressure dropping from his arms.

"I'll never get used to that." He began pacing about the enclosure. "What about this?" He was punching the invisible wall. "You doing this too?"

"Of course not." Barendsack thought he saw Red-Shoes' nose actually go up a little. "There is a pool of . . . young ones. They have not been long hatched, as you would say. They exert force to the specifications of the think-doers, working in shifts. It is simple work."

"There you go again with that word. Tell me what a think-doer is."

"It is not easy to put into language. I would say, that what they do is to think about things. Then they use materials from our planet, and build these things. They put things together that expand our powers in a new way."

"They're inventors. . . or scientists. Is that what you're saying?"

"Scientists? If you say so, Barendsack, it's scientists they are."

"What kind of things are they putting together?"

"I don't fully understand them myself, being a humble . . . tester of rules. That's what I would call myself in language, but . . ."

"Tester of rules? You're a lawyer, Red-Shoes. That's what the hell you are! A goddamn lawyer, just like me! I should have known."

"You move too fast for me, Barendsack. But to continue, the 'scientists' build items that take us beyond the limits of our own little planet — far beyond. And this is something new in our culture. It is quite exciting."

"Why do you think it's exciting?"

"Because our society is very ancient, and nothing like this has ever been done before. It may be working an important shift in our history. Many of the scientists have given up the idea of becoming Elders. They reject the traditional goal of moving toward fulfillment."

"What do you mean by fulfillment?"

"Fulfillment. . . Let me say that it involves a moving beyond a life centered on a physical body. It's always been viewed as an advancement."

"You mean death. Is that what you call fulfillment?"

"I fail to comprehend what you call 'death.' In fact, I'm quite sure that you do not understand it yourself. Suffice it to say that, until lately, fulfillment has been the universal goal of my people."

"And what's happened lately?"

"Happened?" The lizard man was floating on his back now, twisting playfully against the deep green sky. "Nothing really happened, except that the scientists are thinking about expanding civilization across the universe, and don't care about attaining fulfillment. They want to be a new breed of Elder, with no movement toward fulfillment, no transition away from the body."

"What's wrong with immortality?"

"All creatures are immortal. Nevertheless the Elders would say the scientists are making a mistake: Not accepting fulfillment is a wrongness. But many of the other classes are being influenced toward the scientists' point of view. That's the best I can explain. Your language makes the whole thing seem so flat, so simple-minded. Why is that so, Barendsack?"

"You're the teacher, Red-Shoes. You tell me."

The next day Red-Shoes was accompanied by an entourage of about ten other warm-smarts, each clothed in different colored bits of odd wearing apparel. The others seemed older than Red-Shoes, their jewels long and loose, the skin slightly more puckered, and each distinctive in appearance from his companions. It was strange how their eyes were so human looking. But it was their manner, not their appearance, that showed their intelligence.

Barendsack stood nervously watching them, the remaining shreds of his earthly clothing on his body. He had the distinct sensation of being in court without his tie, and knowing he was the one on trial.

"They want to see you and hear us converse," Red-Shoes finally said. "I was just pointing out your better features to them. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not. It always helps to take the jury to the scene of the crime."

"Explain, Barendsack."

"Never mind. I feel like I'm on trial here, Red-Shoes. Are these the guys who are going to decide whether I live or die?"

"They will have something to say about it." Barendsack began to sweat as the silence settled in.

"Well don't just stand there, Red-Shoes! You're my lawyer, for Christ's sake. Tell me how to act. Shouldn't we be having a philosophical discussion or

something?"

"Why? They can't understand a word you say."

"What's the criteria, Red-Shoes? You never told me what they're looking for."

"What are you talking about?"

"The test. . . You said there was a test taking place, right?"

"Correct."

"And there's a rule — they have to see if I fit within the limits of the rule. Isn't that right?"

"Right again. . . In your manner of communication, that is."

"Then tell me the rule. I have a right to know the rule."

"Yes, I suppose you do, though it's never come up before. Let me see. The rule is based on intelligence. Yes, that's the word, intelligence."

"What about intelligence?"

"Intelligent life must be preserved at all costs, as it is of value without limit. That's about the best I can explain it to you. The idea is broader than your language would permit, but I think that conveys part of it."

"You mean I don't have to do anything, but just be intelligent?"

"That's all you have to be, and the rule will be invoked. Why do you make those choking sounds again, Baresack?"

"Because I'm happy, you rummy! This is a piece of cake. All you have to do is tell them how smart I am, and the game's up, right?"

"The game's up?"

"Yes. . . You know, then I pass the test. You testify, you tell them that I have the power of reason, of abstract thought, that I'm bright as a hundred watt bulb, and anything else you can think of, and that's it. I pass the test."

There was a pause while the Warm-Smarts continued to cruise like floats at a miniature Chinese New Year, and Red-Shoes stared mutely at Baresack. "Well? Say something, Red-Shoes. Am I going to pass the test or not?" As his emotions rose the lizard people began to draw back from the enclosure. "Answer me!"

"Baresack, there is an ancient and detailed criteria here. . . many aspects. . ."

"Well?"

"On a presumed scale of, say, one to ten, there would be an entry. . . a threshold level represented by a score of five. Five would be presumed intelligent."

"And where am I, Red-Shoes? Where do I fall on your scale?" The others were departing now, slipping away with surprising speed.

"They calculate. . . They estimate. . . You're about a one, Baresack, and that's stretching it."

Baresack slept most of the next day, and woke when the sun was quite low in the sky. Red-Shoes was there waiting for him, and Baresack felt oddly at ease, almost peaceful. "Are you feeling well, Baresack?"

"Yes, I suppose I am, though I don't know why I should."

"I have been helping you sleep. I hope you don't mind. I know you resent intrusions."

"No. I don't mind. You're going to kill me anyway; why should I mind a little rest?"

"We're not going to kill. . . It's not for the sake of killing, Baresack. Surely you understand that we are not barbarians. Ours is an ancient and advanced civilization."

"Sure. You just happen to make Attila the Hun look like a piker."

"Attila the. . ."

"Never mind. I just have an awful goddamned hard time, Red-Shoes, believing that you're civilized when you've decided to wipe out a whole race, a whole planet of people."

"You understand that this is not my decision, Baresack. I am just. . ."

"Bullshit! Don't hand me that, Red-Shoes. You're as bad as the rest of them."

"As bad? It's certainly not a question of 'bad,' Baresack. I. . ."

"Not a question of bad? You're worse than I thought. Can't you see my point of view? What if the tables were reversed? What if I had you in this bloody glass cage, and had just told you that I was going to murder you and every other Warm-Smart on this lousy planet? What would you say to that?"

"I don't know, but surely that's impossible. . ."

"I thought you were the smart one, Red-Shoes. You have all the imagination of a mackerel." There was a pause while the two eyed each other.

"Come in here a minute," Baresack said.

"What?"

"You heard me. Come in here a minute and let me touch you."

"But why?" Red-Shoes was drawing away, his eyes bulging.

"I don't know why, damn it! Didn't you just tell me I was a moron? So don't expect me to be able to explain myself. But you! You're worse than a moron. You never feel anything. Everything you do is with your brain. You people never have to lift a finger. You don't even know what the people you're about to slaughter feel like."

"I assure you, Baresack, that I can approximate tactile experience with the simplest of projections. . ."

"There you go again, using the brain. You know what I think? I think you're afraid to come in contact with me. Afraid that you'll get hurt, or change your mind. Are you afraid of me, Red-Shoes?"

By way of answer the lizard man moved into the enclosure as though the walls did not exist. His eyes were moving at an alarming rate and the skin around his jewels appeared tight. Baresack slowly put out his hand, and Red-Shoes settled down on it, letting the gravity take him. Baresack's fingers closed gently around the tubular body of the reptile, encountering no resistance.

"I could crush you if I wanted to," said Baresack, staring at the yellow eyes of his companion.

"Of course you could. You have great physical strength, Baresack. The mind of a microbe, but a body full of power." The fingers tensed, but did not close.

"Why do you insult me when I could kill you if I wanted to? If I'm the beast your kangaroo court thinks I am, how can you trust your life to me?"

"Because I have faith in you, Baresack, and now you have shown that you deserve it. Ah. . . may I go now?" Baresack released him, and Red-Shoes floated back beyond the limits of the transparent enclosure. "But my trust is not the only thing you've won. You've also just earned two more points."

As time passed Baresack had learned that earth was to become a communications station for the Warm-Smarts — a place for the intricate machines that could amplify and project the thought power of the lizard men. There was a galaxy that the Warm-Smarts needed to explore, or wanted to. The target galaxy contained planets much like their home planet, and long-range planning by the scientists called for the eventual colonization of space. Earth was half way, and of a good configuration for the placement of a powerful transfer station. It was nearly ideal, in fact, except for the atmosphere. The air was too heavy and would cause problems — fires, storm damage, fluctuating temperatures. It had to go.

Machines were already being assembled that would serve to suck the atmosphere of the planet earth out to deep space, far enough away that it would never come back. Efficiency demanded that this be done, and the project could not go forward unless it were accomplished. The useless creatures of the earth would perish, but the consciousness of the Warm-Smarts would be extended, and as the scientists would say — if they could speak — exalted.

Baresack came to understand that his evaluation was not yet completed, and he began to live in unabated tension and fear. "How am I doing, Red-Shoes?" he would ask daily, but the lizard man hedged his answers and Baresack did not press him.

"Let me ask you this," he said one day. "Say you guys finally conclude that I squeak by on this so-called test of yours — that I'm possessed of rudimentary intelligence. What happens to me?"

Red-Shoes paused, considering the question. "You know quite well that you use words not in the vocabulary you taught me."

"You know what I'm getting at. Answer the question."

"Yes. I do know what you are getting at, and when I came to understand you I began to be quite amazed that you had not asked about this before."

"What's that mean?"

"That for a man of your . . . individuality . . . your primitive sense of aloneness — I lack the words to express this properly — I would expect a much greater concern with your individual welfare."

"It's fear, Red-Shoes; that's all, fear. I don't want to ask because I'm afraid of the answer I might get. And the way you're dodging the question does not do a lot to reassure me."

"Quite perceptive, Baresack. It's amazing how much the speaking of your language has made me like you. You have created a whole new personality within me . . ."

"Red-Shoes!"

"I know . . . the dodging again. Yes. Well, as you might have guessed, there are no plans to reconstitute you back on your planet. I . . . I'm sorry, Baresack, but it is the budget. It would not allow this. The materials and the energy allotment for this project did not allow re-transmission of any field samples. The machine we use to amplify our thoughts, the one that atomized living things into a beam of high-speed particles — this is already on its way to another planet."

There was silence for a long time as Baresack sat cross-legged in his cage, staring at the soles of his bare feet. Red-Shoes started to leave, and then returned, continuing his silent vigil on the brink of the cage, and then he came in and

floated several feet from Baresack's nose, close enough for his weak eyes to notice the tears streaming down the earthman's cheeks.

"There is no pleasure in this for me, Baresack, I . . ."

"Forget it, Red-Shoes. It's not your fault. You've been a good lawyer for me, and I appreciate it. I was just thinking about my family, but it doesn't matter for the moment." Baresack hopped to his feet with such rapidity that Red-Shoes went into a spin, his silver robe slipping askew. "It won't change anything. I want to proceed with the test."

Red-Shoes retreated out of the enclosure, his robe righting itself on his body. "I must ask why it concerns you now, Baresack. It will be the same for you regardless of the outcome."

"No, it won't be the same. Though you think I'm a self-centered barbarian . . ."

"You know better than that. . ."

"I care about my fellow man. Believe it or not, I would not really want to go on living — if you call this living — knowing that I was the last man alive in the universe."

"Just don't give me any more of this phony crap about friendship," Baresack went into a protracted pout, and Red-Shoes drifted slowly away.

The next day Red-Shoes did not visit, and the next day it was long past his usual visiting hour when he approached the cage. Baresack studied him closely and did not like what he saw. He had come to recognize certain expressions in Red-Shoes, and today he looked as close to sadness as he had ever seen him.

"What is it, Red-Shoes? Out with it."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You look lower than a lizard with fallen arches. Give me the bad news, and no hedging."

"You know me too well, Baresack. Yes, there is something. It is a thing I did not expect, and it saddens me greatly."

"Just say it."

"All right. I . . . the judges have now agreed that your intelligence level is at least a five, possibly a six."

"That's fantastic! That . . ."

"Wait! It's no good. They believe you have the indications of intelligence, yes. It is not great intelligence, and it was hard to see at first, but it is there, and they will not deny it. But . . . there is a new rule, Baresack. The judges agreed there must be a new rule."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It was the scientists. They argued that the days of absoluteness on such things must pass into history, and that — what's the word for it? — progress. Yes, I would say 'progress' demanded that there be room for exceptions. They used a new reasoning process, frightening the judges. . ."

"Scare tactics."

" . . . claiming that our own civilization was in jeopardy if this 'progress' was closed off. It was a shocking argument."

"And?"

"The judges were persuaded. This is not like the old days, Baresack. Not like the old days." Red-Shoes was shaking his head, his wattle flapping unabashedly.

"It's the expense, the time, effort and expense put into this project so far."

Barensack stood thinking, staring at the pale sun. "And you, Red-Shoes. What do you think? Do you agree with this decision?"

"Certainly not. In fact, it scares me, if you must know."

"Then why are you accepting it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why are you taking this lying down? When a decision is wrong, a good lawyer files an appeal."

"Appeal?"

"Of course! There's a higher authority, isn't there? A higher 'class' than the judges?"

"What are you getting at?"

"What I'm getting at is that you have to take this thing to the Elders, that's what I'm getting at. Appeal to the Elders and tell your side of it — our side of it."

"That's ridiculous. There is no such thing as an appeal. The Elders would not hear of it. Why, I'd be sent back to the thought tanks for such arrogance."

"Arrogance? The scientists and the judges are the arrogant ones. Aren't they the ones who have disregarded the law of the ancients, taking the law into their own hands?"

"Yes, but within the scope of their responsibilities. . ."

"Don't hand me that, Red-Shoes. There's a revolution going on here. It goes deeper than just this decision. It's been happening for years. Hell, I'm barely a moron by your standards and I can see it. The scientists are changing things, taking over, easing the Elders out. Your whole society is in upheaval, by your standards at least. You sit still for this one and there'll be no stopping it."

"Even if what you say is true, there is no possibility of going to the Elders with a matter such as this. The law does not allow for it. I'm sorry, Barensack, but the judges have ruled."

The next day Red-Shoes found Barensack slumping in the extreme corner of his enclosure. Knees drawn up, he stared at the nothingness around him.

"I advise you not to dwell on this, Barensack. It is certainly not your fault, you know. Your Lord knows, as you like to say, that you did all you could."

"I know it's not my fault. Who said it was my fault?"

"Well, no one, surely, but I just. . ."

"If you want to talk about fault, then I'll talk about fault."

"Yes, of course it would do no good. . ."

"It wasn't my fault. I did my part — you say so yourself. There's no need to."

"It's not a question of blame, Barensack."

"No? You're wrong there, Red-Shoes. It is a question of blame, and do you know who I blame?"

"I don't. . . I wouldn't. . ."

"I blame you, Red-Shoes. You. Now, what do you think of that?"

The lizard man appeared stunned, his eye movements so rapid that Barensack could not watch him. "You blame me? Me, Barensack? Surely I did everything I possibly could."

"Don't hand me that! You're my lawyer, Red-Shoes. Don't you know what that means? You don't quit just because some pompous judge hands down a bad decision. Sure, you put on a good case, convinced them that I qualify under your rule as a creature of intelligence. Then they changed the rule on you. That was

unprecedented, wasn't it?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Shocking, isn't that what you called it?"

"Yes, I believe I did."

"Then why aren't you doing something about it?"

"It would violate our law to. . ."

"Law? What law? The law has been violated by the scientists. This is war, Red-Shoes, or as close to it as you've ever been. In time of war, extraordinary measures are called for."

"I don't know, Barensack. There is some truth in what you are saying, but to completely abandon accepted procedures — it would be futile."

"How do you know? Look, don't do it for me. I'm little more than a talking beast to your society anyway. Do it for the Elders, and for the whole race of Warm-Smarts."

"For the Elders?"

"Certainly. They're the one who will be the losers here, and your whole society along with them. You're abandoning the principles that have made you a great nation. Isn't that what you're afraid of yourself?"

"I doubt what I fear."

"You mean you don't even know what you're afraid of?"

"Have it your way, Barensack, but all I know is that I am very disturbed about something, and I cannot yet explain what it is." He was drifting away. "Maybe you are right after all."

"Will you go to the Elders, Red-Shoes? Red-Shoes! Answer me — will you go. . ."

The next time Red-Shoes came two other lizard people came with him. They were larger than Red-Shoes, wearing white robes, and they appeared different — older than the other Warm-Smarts he had seen so far. There was little doubt in Barensack's mind that they were Elders, and a flock of butterflies immediately took up residence in his stomach. There was no sound as the creatures floated around his enclosure. "What should I do, Red-Shoes, act natural?" No response. "These are Elders, aren't they? You did what I asked you to?" Barensack found himself smiling ridiculously. "Shall I recite something?"

It was a whisper, and barely heard within the depths of Barensack's head: "Shut the hell up, Barensack." He shut up.

The day after the visit of the Elders Barensack was returned to the simulated garden. No other animals were evident, and the silence of the place was maddening. But he found a fresh suit of clothes, identical to the suit he wore on the day of his abduction across space, and he relished the warmth of them in the chilly artificial climate. They were of an exceedingly soft texture, and Barensack wondered if they were real or a mere concoction of the mind, zapped up by a busy band of Warm-Smart neophytes. Nothing would surprise him.

His curiosity was intense at first but as the days stretched into weeks it lessened, and he tried to make the best of it. When Red-Shoes appeared to him again it was almost an anticlimax. Barensack had been occupying the previous few days figuring out how to kill himself, and then trying in vain to work up the courage to do the deed. But it was only a fantasy. Besides, even death in this alien world was

clothed with frightening strangeness.

It was early of a morning when he opened his eyes and found Red-Shoes floating a foot from the end of his nose.

"Well. . . Red-Shoes, my last friend. Came back, did you? I thought you had abandoned me, left me to my own devices. Have you been listening as I carry on conversations with myself? Heard me curse you, and all your rotten band of barbarians along with you?" There was no response. "TALK TO ME RED-SHOES! Talk to me . . . before I go absolutely crazy."

"Greetings, Baresack." The voice was weak. "I hope you have been well."

"Well? Listen. . ."

"Yes, but you should know that communication with you is all but forbidden at this time. I am only to thank you, and send you on your way."

"What in the hell are you talking about! If you think. . ."

"We did learn something from you after all, but as for now . . . Things are too sensitive among us to risk the disruption of your alien thought. We are in the process of . . . tilting the plane of our thinking; a straightening. Things are sensitive, but approaching that of the level."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but I want some answers before you put me on the dissecting table, and I'm going to get them one way or the other." He was on his feet, stalking toward the retreating Red-Shoes as he spoke.

"Good-by, Baresack. God speed."

"I. . ." Blackness; and cold.

An infinite abyss of blackness and cold.

He awoke on the grass median strip of the very highway from which he and certain parts of his V.W. bus had been kidnapped. He was naked and shivering, though he could see that it was still summer. There was no heat in his bones, as though it had been strewn through space by the mysterious beam that brought him home. The cars looked very ordinary, and very welcome as they slowed for their occupants to get a startled look at him. And their staring faces looked very good. So good, that he soon quit shivering and stared back, waving to one and all.

Then he felt something in his hand and looked down. There in his palm were two tiny, red shoes made of soft felt.

He was still laughing as a state policeman approached sternly on heavy, black boots. ●

Eugene Dice

I am an environmental lawyer for the state of Pennsylvania. I have been a student of sf for the past ten years or so, and have been trying to teach myself how to write for much longer. I see science fiction as a tremendously exciting medium for man to consider the consequences of his actions. Humankind is an endangered species standing in need of a higher consciousness

with the insight to include it on the list. Art can raise consciousness to the necessary level, and sf is the art form that does it most directly.

I read a little of everything, but have lost the desire to write anything but poetry and sf. I haven't figured out quite what the two genres have in common, though a good sf story tends to be a prolonged metaphor.

Perhaps being a lawyer has instilled in me an unnatural fear of saying anything too directly. Sf, like good poetry, supplies the distance that perspective requires. Archibald MacLeish said that poets are the true realists. The same can be said, perhaps

to a lesser degree, of sf writers.

I think that's why I write sf, though I would never have figured that out if I hadn't sat down to compose this biography.

TIMELY SAVINGS

Since time is much too precious to waste
she saves it in small amounts:
seconds, minutes, and when she can afford it
"quarters" of hours.

Having started her savings with the "loose change"
found in the deep pockets of dull conversations,
she insists that once you start searching
you can develop a skill
and find lost moments almost anywhere you look.

People are always losing track of time.
"Where does the time go?" can frequently be heard,
particularly when one's having a good time at a party.

So she keeps an eagle eye out
while cleaning up afterwards
to spot and save any that might have slipped through
the fingers of slightly intoxicated guests.

Many lost moments can be found
caught in the cushions of television room couches,
under automobile seats, and sometimes
staring right up at you on the sidewalks.

Kids are always wasting their spare time,
tossing it away as if it were a renewable resource,
while hanging around on street corners.

She deposits all these accumulated lost moments
into a little glass bank
she calls her "hourglass"
which cannot be opened except by breaking it
and emptying it all in one huge sum.

She is saving it,
she says with a sparkle in her eye,
for a sunny day.

— Peter Payack

AMAZING/FANTASTIC 97

THE TICK TOCK THIEF

Ted Mancuso

Illustrated by
Richard Rouse

The tick tock thief carpet-stepped through the shut eye dark. He heard ahead of himself as far as he could. The pump and pullers of his very legs fist-tightened thick as sponges swelled with blood. And he was very wary all around.

At ankle height in the dark ahead, the electric rods ran trying to trip him up. Stony staring cyclopes' eyes to eye streamed the beamed traps. But the thief passed over.

The pulleys and levers of his skill made sure the sure steps were without boom, and the room quite grave like; quiet, with the presence of a deserted library. Science.Tech (concrete) Building muffled the sound around by him, and on he toed.

Noise was the occupational hazard of the time thief for it was useless and could not be fenced. Years since back cat alley childhood had he crept, stealing time; . . . the freeze box resurrection coffins (time evaded) . . . longevity drugs and philtres (time fooled) . . . endless plastic parts of men (time synthesized) . . . all stored in his whenhouse, buried there. But now, August 8th 2089, if you want to pin the stream, he was stealing toward the one . . . The Time Distorter, the fun house mirror of the moments passing. Here, in the rapidly eroding concrete building, he crept to the stream-stopper, the dammer of time, the Distorter. And mind tightened to loosen body's step, to soften sole to floor.

The doorknob flamed, and the acetylene fire froze into a knob-shape. Then, with quick, clipped speed, it fell . . . But onto leathers stuffed with finger flesh. No sound.

Into the final room he soundless stepped. "How will I explain to Emi Jane?" the thought floated past. Past the final barrier he passed, past the past. The room was wall-less, sight-less, light-less; all close and suffocating dark save for the single spotlit pedestal on which the Time Distorter sat, unmoving, while everything — everything else — moved in the watchwork river around it.

His mind clicked "forever" as he reached for the machine he had wanted for so long. But as he handed towards it, the room was boom exploded and the noise was all over, drowning the already flooded sense centers of his brain. His alarm at the alarm panicked his spine and fumbled with the machine as though he were a rag doll caught in shaking dog jaws. How he switched the switch on as he ran was never clear. But he ran as fast as his fear could carry him towards the escaping door.

Shiny buttons sparkled as he spoke for he was a brass buttoned copper. "We couldn't have caught," he said again, "couldn't have caught him, Lieutenant, but he had not moved."

"What do you mean?" The cigar bounced out the words like a band leader's baton, but the Lieutenant's eyes moved counter-time. More facts he asked, "I just arrived . . . He had the Distorter with him, right? Is it damaged?"

"He had the Distorter undamaged. But strange the thing that my man, Homer, walked into the darkness first and there the time thief was running for the door with the Distorter in arm. Homer took the Distorter from him then the other men grabbed him and he's downstairs in the wagon now."

"You mean to say, that he was there . . ." finger pointing to pedestal once again, Distorter setting, "and he had not moved all that time it took for you to get down here?"

"Oh, maybe an inch or two," the copper said, and sparkled. ●

Ted Mancuso

I write in my spare time (who doesn't?) when I'm not teaching the martial arts. Most of my work has been catch-as-catch can but I have managed to publish a couple of books (one science fiction entitled *The Granville Hypothesis: Manor*, and the other on the martial arts as it relates to young people: *Ohara*). When I'm not doing book-length work I like to try my hand at things like this short-short; tone pieces where I select and experiment with a consistent-but-unusual-voice. In this case I've tried to capture some of the feel of the future as well as the situation.



Manly Wade Wellman

THE LOST AND THE LURKING

From the forthcoming novel to be published by Doubleday in December, The Lost and the Lurking. In this episode, John, the wandering balladeer, has been asked by the United States government to investigate creepily mysterious reports about Wolver, a remote settlement in the Southern mountains. At first he is received there with resentment and a trifle of violence, but apparently the people look on him as the wielder of strange powers. All he can decide about them is that they live together as members of a dubious cult. Then Tiphaine, the bolefully beautiful woman who rules in Wolver, invites him to a meeting at her house. He decides to attend and find out the truth, whatever that may be.

When I tramped in along Wolver's gravelly main street this time, the folks at all the houses gave me their long looks from their doors and windows and yards. In front of one place stood some little rough-dressed children, their eyes on me as tight as buttons on a shirt, and round the corner of the house poked out a round, brown head, either another child or some creature I didn't know, a-looking, too. The old folks stood together at the open door, a-gossiping at me like frogs, the youngins and a-saying something something to one another. Likely it was something like, "Yonder comes John, a-headed for Tiphaine's place." I had it in mind, the folks of Wolver had begun to know who I was, had begun to figure on me.

And figure what?

The last rays of the sun had turned from red to rose on the mountain top as I got to Tiphaine's big hedged-in house, in along that bushy-bordered front path and up on the porch. I swung the big brass knocker ring where it hung in the monkey jaws, and right off quick the door opened inward. It was little Quill Norbury there, all dressed up fine in a powder-blue slack suit with saddle-stitched lapels, and he had a bright red scarf tucked in round his skinny neck.

"Oh," he said, his eyes popped out at me. "John. Come right in the house, John, Tiphaine said we could expect you."

Illustrated by Gary Freeman

In I came as he bade me, past where the Earth Mother statue waited with its curly horns and its look of a woman and beast in one. Norbury walked ahead of me through the hallway into the inside room.

A bunch of folks sat at the table in there. On the table was spread a cloth embroidered in letters I didn't know, like the ones on the hangings at the walls. There were glasses set out and a big crockery wine jug. Overhead glittered the ring of lamps.

At the head of the table, in a black wooden chair with padded arms, sat Tiphaine, in all her beauty she knew so well she had. She was dressed in another close-clinging robe, this time of gleamy black cloth, probably silk again, with a pattern of gold thread worked up and down in it. Others were Ottom Orcutt, the blacksmith, who had on what must have been his best brown suit of store clothes; Eula Jarboe the storekeeper lady, her hair stuck here and there with shiny jewel things; and the blonde girl Lute Baynor, in a nice green frock, with a nervous look in her blue eyes. Norbury took a chair next to Tiphaine. One empty seat was left, the other end of the table from Tiphaine. She pointed to it with the hand that wore the pearl ring.

"You may sit there, John," she said, like as if she was a-making me the lucky winner of a prize. "There, opposite me. I see that you brought your guitar with you. Good."

"Most times I fetch it along where I go," I said, as I sat down the the guitar across my lap.

"Friends," she said, and looked on all the others, all the way round the table. "You who come here tonight to sit with me. I'll ask John to sing whatever song he might think appropriate for a gathering like this."

"Yes," said Quill Norbury, with half a husk in his skinny throat.

"If you truly want me to," I said, for I'd thought of the right song for that place, and I touched the string. "Here's one I just so happened to read one time in a book, and put a tune to it myself."

Their eyes were on me, their shiny eyes. Amongst the curtains on the walls, seemed like there was a stir and a whisper. I sang:

"I last night lay all alone
On the ground, and heard the mandrake groan;
And plucked him up, though he grew full low,
And as I had done, I heard the cock crow."

They nodded at that and grinned to one another, more than I thought the song was worth. "Mandrake," said Tiphaine from the other end of the table. "We're acquainted with the mandrake. Go on, John, another verse if you know one."

I sang another verse, one that always sort of chilled me:

"A murderer yonder was hung in chains,
The sun and the wind had shrunk his veins;
I bit off a sinew, I clipped his hair,
I brought off his rags, that danced in the air."

Then I stopped, with my palm flat on the strings to hush them.

"Go on," said Tiphaine again, like as if she gave me an order. "Sing the rest of it."

I set the guitar down on the floor. "That's all I know of the thing," I told her, which wasn't quite the truth. "I got it from a fellow in Chapel Hill I used to know. He had a book, *Percy's Relics*."

"Reliques," said Quill Norbury, the way a teacher sets a boy right in school. "*Percy's Reliques* is the title."

"And Bishop Percy was quoting Ben Jonson," added on Tiphaine. "Rare Ben Jonson, who was no skeptic, who seemed to know what he put down in what he called 'The Witches' Song.' A good instinct, I suggest, prompted John to give us those appropriate and tuneless verses."

Her eyes were upon me while she talked, the way ninety-nine men out of a hundred would like to have them, but right that moment I was the hundredth man.

"We liked them immensely," she said, "and we all wish that John could supply others."

"I can supply others," spoke up Quill Norbury, like the teacher's pet.

"Me, too, I think," said Eula Jarboe.

"A little later, perhaps," Tiphaine decided for them. "Or rather, considerably later, after what we must do this night." One more time, she looked round the table at them, and at me. "There is, as all of you are aware, a preparatory ritual for us here. It begins with the partaking of wine, which is the soul of life."

She took up the wine jug. I could see that it had something on it like a picture of spread-out bat wings. All the others passed her up their glasses and she filled them. I sent along my glass last of all, and into it she poured wine as red as the wall curtains, as red as blood, and sent it back to me. She smiled the length of the table at me, the way a specially beautiful fox might could smile outside a chicken run.

"John," she sort of purred, while she filled her own glass, "you reminded me once — earlier today, as a matter of fact — that there's luck in a changed cup. Perhaps you'd like to change cups with me again."

"No, ma'am, I do thank you," I said. "This time I'll just stay with what I've got here."

She laughed at that, like a chime of silver bells.

"How calculating you are, John, and how well you use the sharp wits you were born with. You rationalized at once that if I suggested changing drinks with you, the one I'd already served you was safe."

That was exactly the thing I'd had in mind, but all I said was "I thank you for that good word about how I think."

"And now," she said, a-giving out with her smile all the way round, "I'll demonstrate that there was nothing whatever unsafe about the cup I offered to change with John." She lifted her drink high. "My friends, let's all join in a pledge to happiness and triumph in future."

She set her glass to her lovely lips and drank. The others all drank, too. I drank the last of them all, with the feeling that it wouldn't hurt. The wine tasted right good.

"So much for that," said Tiphaine, and put her glass down. "Attention, all. Later tonight, much later, we do that which we are directed to do. But just at present, John is here among us from wherever he came from, he is here to join us. Be one of us. Ottom, bring me the book."

He got up and fetched it from its side table and handed it to her. She flung it open where a funny-looking marker showed midway betwixt its pages. Air soul in that bunch round the table looked hard at here. Me, too, I looked.

"I am your prophetess," said Tiphaine, a-making her voice deep and her words slow. "I am your priestess, for I was ordained your priestess. Hear me, all of you, for I am of the spirit of air, of water, earth, fire."

"Amin," said the others, all of them together. Not amen, amin.

"Hail, you who are here with us," Tiphaine fairly shouted out, and I felt that there was a stir in the hangings on the walls. The fringed bottoms lifted up, like the claws of animals.

"Hail," she said. "You, the air, the sea, the abode! You, the wisdom, the might, the beauty!"

"Amin," all of them said, all of them but me. I started in to tell myself that these things meant what I'd been a-figuring on, a-guessing, from the first minute I'd walked into Wolver.

Tiphaine lifted up her left hand, the one with the ring on it, and signed the cross at them. But she had her thumb up betwixt her first and second fingers. Once, back when I was still in the army, an Italian fellow in my outfit had told me that that was the nastiest, lowest-down way to hold the hand there ever was. "So mote it be," the others all droned out. Not might, mote.

"Hear the words of the Book of Life," said Tiphaine, a-dropping her hand back to the open page. "Let him whose name we do not say make the hour auspicious, let him open to us the gates of life, let him grant us the accomplishment of true will among us and within us."

Quill Norbury hopped up from where he sat beside her. He began to move round the table, round it from right to left, what I've heard called widdershins; the other way from how the sun goes round the world, from how the hands of the clock go on the dial. He stopped a second next to my chair and with the toe of his foot marked a cross on the floor, close to my guitar.

"To love me is better than all things," read out Tiphaine, "For one kiss will you give all. I am all pleasure and purple. Put on wings and rise before me. Drink to me."

They took up their glasses and drank at her word, all but Norbury, who was still on his half-dancey way round the table.

"I am the blue-lidded daughter of sunset," said Tiphaine. "More lovely than you dare to dream."

That sounded more or less like as if she was a-making an invitation to whoever heard her, but the others only said "Amin," said it halfway with a moan in their throats.

Norbury had come back to his chair and sat down, sat down hard and heavy, like as if that move round the table had tired him out. Tiphaine read more from her Book of Life.

"Hail, Earth Mother," she rang out the words, "from whom all living things are born, to whom all dying things return. Give unto us the accomplishment of our true wills, our great work. Give unto us the power of life and death over the world that dwells in darkness."

"Amin," they all said the word together.

Another spell of silence. Suddenly I saw, plain as day, what they were up to here in little Wolver.

I'd come smack up against those who looked in the dark places for the power of life and death. I recollected two crazy-headed brothers on Wolter Mountain who called themselves Druids, who tried to raise up old Indian ghost-devils to power them. And the Shonokins at Immer Settlement, who'd claimed to be of a people who'd owned America before the first Indians, and their ugly goings on. Now again, right here, that talk of the power of life and death. Just the same old song by the same old mocking bird; or if it wasn't the same old mocking bird, it might could just as well be — the power of life and death. Who could want that, I wondered myself. Not me, leastwasts. I didn't want that power over man, woman or child, and I didn't want air living soul to have it over me.

Finally Tiphaine got up. Gentlemen, what a beauty-looking woman she was in her black robe with the gold on it. She commenced her own dancey walk round the table, the opposite direction from Norbury's widdershins move. From left to right she took her way. She stopped for half a second behind my chair and put her hand on my shoulder. I felt like as if her touch burnt through my shirt.

"John," she said, close against my ear. "Meditate in silence, John. The truth will come to you within your heart."

Then she took her hand away. "John," she said, louder, "we rejoice that you have come here. You will join with us, be great and strong among us."

The burning touch of her hand on my shoulder again.

"You'll learn to stand with your head above the heavens, your feet below the hells."

It didn't sound like the thing I wanted to do, not to me it didn't.

She moved a step away. "We do not ask for pacts or bargains," she said, a-looking down at me. "We are not tradespeople, John; you must know that already. There is a giving here, not a trading. There is a great recompense, not a price."

And how important all that sounded, I thought as her hand burnt on my shoulder. All the curtains on the walls stirred and seemed to whisper, near about like half-heard words.

She took up her hand from me at last and went a-shimmering back to her chair and sat herself in it.

"John has been miraculously sent to us," she said to the others. "He came here a perilous way, past the deadly fires. Perhaps he did not fully know the strength that we see in him. But we are glad that he has come here. The time is at hand for us to receive him into our fellowship."

Her eyes looked down at me, lovely, lovely, and how she smiled with her full lips.

"John," she whispered, sweet as honey, "under just what mysterious circumstances, what great auspices, you appear among us, it is perhaps not yet time to decide. You are full of mystery, John, and so are we, here in Wolver."

I didn't speak nor yet move. I waited for what that would lead up to.

"Witchcraft has been misunderstood," she said. "Persecuted. For a while it has been denied. But it has come to be much talked of today, though not often intelligently. Many who profess witchcraft do so with only weak understanding.

It needs that they be instructed, educated. If covens everywhere could attain to knowing something, doing something, could unite — very well. We could command governments — not overthrow governments, that is not our direction. We have other directions."

"The thorn in the foot," droned out Eula Jarboe, in a half-sleepy voice. "The fly in the amber."

"Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," said Norbury.

"So spoke Aleister Crowley," nodded Tiphaine. "Great Aleister. Our will is here expressed, and will remain. The word witch means wisdom, and why should wisdom be forbidden? It is a word for enlightenment, progress. Magic began all the sciences. Medicine had its start in Stone Age times, in the hands of wizards. Mystic observers of the skies, the ancient astrologers, begat astronomy. The brilliant experimental mixtures of alchemy gave the world chemistry and physics. Once all these sciences were suspected and condemned and cruelly punished by the established governments and religions."

She waited to let that much sink in. Then:

"The night gods of sorcery, the oldest gods of all, yet seek to benefit and enlighten the whole of mankind. Sorcery is to be honored — revered, followed. Its enemies are to be convicted." Her hands clenched into fists. "Eliminated."

"Amin," they all said, like as if to a prayer. All but me.

"John does not fear the fires of destruction," Tiphaine went ahead, her eyes fastened on me. "He walks past them without fear."

"Without fear," Eula Jarboe repeated her.

"John can return to those fires," said Tiphaine. "He can quench them, set us free from their terror."

"Set us free from their terror," said Eula Jarboe, in a hushed-down voice.

"John can be of health and help to us," said Tiphaine, still a-watching me.

"Health and help, John. Hear now what I say."

She rolled out what she said, like as if it was in the book before her. Perhaps, somewhere, that's where it was.

"The night gods are here with us, they listen to us, they join us," she said.

"They endow us with the wit and will to control nature beyond the natural. Those who doubt, who scoff, their time grows shorter with every moment."

"Amin," went up all the way round the table.

"And you, John," she told me, "when you put out those fires, you will be made foremost among us."

"So mote it be," the others said. One of them, I reckoned, gulped over the words. Quill Norbury? Lute Baynor? I couldn't say for dead certain, but somebody at the table didn't much like what Tiphaine seemed to offer me about being foremost.

And me, I didn't like it air bit.

For, plain as print, Tiphaine wanted me to be in the devilish scheme she talked about, read about. Witchcraft or sorcery, call it how you like, that was what was up, carload lots of it. She had me there amongst them because somehow she reckoned I could do them good in their badness. She reckoned that all she had to do was tell me, "Come," and I'd come. And that wasn't for

me.

Her eyes were close on me, lovely again, like as if she and I were there all alone together.

"John," she petted my name with her voice, "you have heard, you understand. You came to Wolver for something, and now you know what it is. We're gathered here to welcome you. How do you present yourself to our fellowship?"

I thought a second, just one second. "Why, as to that," I replied her, "what if I picked and sang you all something?"

"Why, of course, if that's how you will make your answer," she smiled at me. "Sing again."

"Sing again, John," they all of them said after her.

"Sure enough."

Up with my guitar across my knee. I sought me out a couple of chords.

"I'll just do this one," I said. "It so happens that it's likewise in that Percy's Relics book we've been a-talking about."

All of them sat and looked and listened. I struck across the silver strings, and I sang:

"In ancient days, tradition shows

A base and wicked elf arose,

The Witch of Wokey high;

Of late I heard the fearful tale

From Sue, and Roger of the vale,

On some long winter's night."

"Hold on, what's that you're a-giving us?" said one of them, most likely it was Ottom Orcutt, but I paid no mind. I went right ahead with the song:

"From Glaston came a learned wight

Full bent to mar her fell despatch,

And well he did, I ween;

Such mischief hair had yet been known,

And, since his mickle learning shown,

Such mischief nair hath been."

"Stop that, this instant!" Tiphaine screamed, shrill as a whistle. "Why are you singing that song against us?"

She had jumped to her feet. The others were up, too, and so was I.

"You meant it for a mockery," Tiphaine accused me.

"Yessum," I kept my voice quiet to say.

"You've deceived us," Tiphaine stammered out at me. "You aren't one of us."

"Recollect that I nair said I was," I told her. "Not one time, remember."

I put my guitar under my arm and headed for the door.

"Wait a second," Ottom Orcutt sort of growled, and started in to follow me. I turned back and stood and looked him all up and down.

"You'd do yourself a favor to leave me be, Ottom," I gave him warning. "You and I had us a little fist and skull yesterday evening, and, the way I recollect it, you didn't have aught the better of it."

He stopped where he was and trembled his cut mouth. "That was outside at

the store house," he mumbled. "But here, in Tiphaine's own house —"

"You other folks," I said to them, "do you all want to stand round and watch me give Ottom another whipping, right here on your own dunghill? Say the word and it'll happen."

"Stand easy, Ottom," Tiphaine ordered him. "John, if you're not of us, who are you?"

"I keep a-telling you all," I said. "Just call me John."

Again I walked toward the door with my guitar. Not slow, not fast. I thought they teetered on their feet, but nair one of them followed. I went along the hall, past that Earth Mother thing, and out the front door and along the bushy path, with scrappy noises to both sides. I got to the street and headed off for where my camp waited.

SO I SLOGGED straight ahead, on that gravel track, without much of a light from the veiled sky. The houses on both sides were dark, no lamps to be seen in the windows, though it wasn't much late in the night. I wondered what folks might could be up to inside, and I allowed to myself that likely it wasn't aught of good.

Back there behind me rose up a murmur of voices. I had a sense that the ones I'd seen in Tiphaine's house had come out to her gate. Maybe not all of them, but anyway some, to crane after me and chatter. Leastways, they didn't come along after me. Tiphaine had allowed that there was something about the trash fires that pestered them. And I was human enough to be glad for that.

On I went, and on, in what blurred moonlight there was. I left the houses of Wolver behind me on the road. Yonder stood that ruined-old church, all among its brushy yard and its tipped-over gravestones. It looked dark and sad in the night; and no wonder, a-being forsaken thataway. Once it had tried to serve the town of Wolver with the good word, and now it was long gone past such work.

I felt some better when I got past that church and had the settlement of Wolver, with all those lost and lurking folks, behind me. There was a sense in me that I'd be better off away from Wolver. "Our will is here," Tiphaine had said at her table, and had added on that their will would get to be in other places. But not right yet, I let myself hope.

The way was darker there, with the trees to both sides of the track, but I'd been along there by daylight four-five times. I let my feet find their direction, the way you can do with a good, smart horse in the nighttime. They took me off the road and into the woods at the right place. I made it my business not to trip over roots till I got to my camping place.

I leaned my guitar against a yew tree out of sight of whaitair might could have tried to come a-following me. Then I sat down on the hump of a root. I didn't make a fire, that would attract attention. I reckoned it was high time to think things out, think them out clear and correct.

There was no I reckon about it, Tiphaine and her crowd had made them a long jump to what they thought was a fact and wasn't a fact, no such thing. I'd come into Wolver past the junk heaps and the fires they seemed somehow to be afraid of, and then I'd whipped Ottom Orcutt in a fist fight when he wasn't

supposed to be whipped. After that, Tiphaine had taken her try at me to have me kiss the foot of her Earth Mother statue, and I hadn't, and that made her more certain. She and her crowd had been ready to put me through some sort of initiation, and I'd sung them that Witch of Wokey song to show them there was nothing doing.

So now, I reckoned they'd put me down as their enemy, which was just what I was. They hadn't come a-following after me — it might could be that they worried about the fires at the trash dumps, for whatever it was scared them about those. Anyhow, I had found out what they were up to. Witchcraft, that was what, and I could report that fact to the government men.

But what would the government men say to that?

No great much, I reckoned, and what they would say would come with a dry grin. Witchcraft? Go tell about it to the little baby children, and don't bother us about it unless your witchcraft is a-doing something actual. That was more or less what they'd say, and then they'd add on something like, what you'd better do, John is just pick your guitar and sing us a couple-three verses of "Old Mountain Dew."

After all, they'd have something on their side of what the Cherokees call *tum-tum*. Up to now, Tiphaine and her crowd had put on a show with me, and no more than that. Their powers, if they had them, hadn't worked. Ottom Orcutt had been supposed to give me a whipping, and it had gone the other way round. Tiphaine had been supposed to spellbind me with her pearl ring, and it hadn't come off. Maybe all they had was just crazy talk, stuff that wasn't so.

But I doubted that. I had a feeling that there was something big and ugly here, and I've learned to hark at my own feelings. I'd go back to Wolver in the morning, even if they were set for me, were fixing to do something rough to me. It would likely be dangerous, but danger had been my breakfast and dinner and supper before this. I'd better do it. Smell out their secret, see for sure how bad a thing it was. You don't report just guesses to the government. You report facts, or no point a-making a report.

The night was airish and I felt some touch of cold, but I didn't make me a fire. Nobody had followed me on to my camp so far, but this might could be the time for somebody to try it. I leant myself to the yew tree beside my guitar and sort of shrugged my clothes round me. That helped some. I'd had me a day to tire the strongest man air was, and so I don't much reckon it was strange for me to go off to sleep, with a whippoornil a-piping the three notes of its call to me.

I don't truly reckon that the sleep I slept was air kind of a sound one. I had me a set of dreams that made me start awake time after time. Once I thought I was out-a-walking with Evadare along a path, when a big black dog jumped up right in front of us and showed us fire a-blazing out of its mouth. Then again, it seemed like as if I stood beside a foggy river and watched a big boatload of folks as they sank down into the black water. Finally I thought I could hear voices all together, and when I waked up from that I truly heard them.

They were someway far off, I knew the second I heard them in the night, somewhere off toward Wolver. They sounded like a bunch of men and women a-laughing and a-hollering all together, and I stood up so as to hear them better. There came a long-drawn strain of music, shrill and trembly. I wondered myself

what instrument made it. After that, they seemed to start in to sing together. The Wolver crowd was up to something, that was for sure, far off but within earshot.

I pulled out from under the yew tree and looked up at the sky. I could barely see the stars, but there were enough of them to tell me it was in the small hours before morning. I told myself that it was up to me to go have a look.

Careful as careful, I picked my way out to the road and faced toward where the noise was. Above me was the veiled half of the moon, and as I moved on the road I hung close to the trees at the side so as to stay out of the soft light. The noise got louder yet as I made my way nearer. Finally I came to where I could see to the tumbledown church, and that's where they were.

Yonder stood the church, a-looking all haggly and ruined, even in the murky moonlight, and amongst the bushes in the yard there blazed up a fire. Maybe they'd put something into that fire, because it flung up streaks of white and blue amongst the red, like something I'd once seen when the Northern Lights were out.

And an almighty racket went up from there round the fire, those chanty voices and the shrill, wailing music.

I kept a-sneaking along the side of the road, as close under the trees as I could get. Now I made out black shadows on the jump, betwixt the fire and me. Those were folks at some kind of dance, and as I made my way still yet closer under the trees, I could see that they looked to be naked. By then I could hear the things they whooped out:

"Hyaa, hyaa!"

"Sabbat, sabbat!"

"Dance here, dance there!"

It was more or less a song, and it got to my recollection of things I'd heard and read about. That was the way witches yelled to one another at their ceremonies. I was getting in on a big Satan-worshipping business, as if I couldn't have guessed at such a thing already.

But me, I needed to get a closer look than I had under the trees. While they sang and danced, I flung myself down where a shadow went across the road and wiggled my way over like a worm. On the far side I hiked up on my hands and knees and crawled toward the bushes in front of the burying ground.

I could see them plain in the firelight. Men and women two by two, as naked as they were born on this earth, and I might say that no great many of them looked at all good thataway. They moved in front of the fire from my left to my right, the widdershins way. I saw them do a few steps with each couple back to back, the figure the dance-callers call do-si-do, now stooped almost to the ground, now straight up with hair a-flying and a-whipping in the air. And on the far side of the fire, in the middle of the circle of dancers, stood what looked like three others of them, straight and motionless as rocks.

I reckoned I'd better find out what that three was up to while the others danced. The thing to do was get round to their side of the fire.

I'd put myself all the way into the burying ground by now, and I crawled amongst old gravestones with that music a-making its whine all round. By that time, I could see the folks who were a-making it. A man and a woman, and he had an accordion and she had some kind of flute or fife. I wondered myself if I

could pick that wild-as-all-hell tune on my guitar. The musicians stood off to the side away from the dancing circle, and I crept on my all fours behind them. There rose up the church, the closest I'd seen it. It was that busted to pieces, I wouldn't have wondered at it if it had fallen down before my eyes. I got to it, almost to where it had the remains of steps, and from there I could see into the circle, could see the three by the fire.

And then, as I'd found my way to the far side of the fire, those naked folks switched off to dance round in a line, one behind the other. The flute and the accordion player did a new toon and all of them sang to it, something like this:

"Cummer, go ye before, cummer, go ye;

Gif ye not go before, cummer, let me!"

I'd nair heard that song before, but once I'd read it, and it was the song that once got sung for just such a dance as this, long ago in Scotland at another tumbledown old church, at North Berwick. Just what the words meant I couldn't tell, but they made my blood grow chill in me.

From where I'd dragged myself to spy, I could see past the dancers into the space round the fire. Of the three that stood there, two were dressed up someway crazy. One was a tall figure, robed all dark, with horns on the head, like the ones on the Earth Mother's head in Tiphaine's hall. The other, not so tall, had a sparkly head ring like a crown, and a robe of red. The third of them I knew, for she stood all pale-white naked and right shapely, with her yellow hair in a tumble. It was the young girl Lute Baynor, and seemed like to me that she shivered.

"And now!" they all yelled out together. "And now, our father who wert in heaven!"

Wert in heaven . . . who was it had been in heaven and fell out? I recollected that, too.

The two robed ones were up to something near the fire. They had two rocks there, and they were a-putting something across them. It was a sort of flat slab, maybe one of the tombstones, and they laid it the way you put a board on trestles to make a picnic table. The one in red took Lute Baynor by the wrist and sort of pulled her along, and she lay down on her back on the flat rock. Then the red-robed one stood over her and put a tall cup, silver by the look, on her white belly. It was the kind of cup you use for a communion ceremony. They were just before a-having some kind of special do, what you call a ritual, and I could reckon it would be a right ugly one.

I got up on my hands to see if I could make out what was a-going on. And that was my mistake.

"A stranger!" whooped the one in dark robe with the horned head, and I knew the voice. Tiphaine, that was the voice.

"A spy!" she called out in that ringing voice of hers. "There by the steps—capture him!"

That quick, they were after me. All the men of the bunch, eight or ten of them, naked and fast on their feet.

I wasn't about to fight them all, not that many. I jumped to my feet and ran myself, straight at them. They weren't set for that to happen, and I sailed right through amongst them. One tried to get a hand on me, but I knocked him sideways with an elbow. I tore on into where the dancing circle had been—only

a bunch of women there, with their clothes off and their hair straggly, all a-goggling — and I tore past that altar. Lute Baynor sat up and knocked over the silver cup. I jumped high at the fire and through it, felt its heat on me for a wink of time. I landed at a run on the far side, and at a run I went a-sailing off to get out of the churchyard amongst the old stones of the grave.

All of those men were after me, a-yelling to one another.

"Catch him!"

"Is that John?"

"Get him, drag him down!"

I wove my way through some scratchy, thorny bushes and was out on the gravelly road. I headed in the direction away from Wolver. They came on behind me, a-yelling. I heard one of them come out with a bad word, likely his bare foot had come down on a sharp rock. But another of them was close at my back, I could tell and nair needed to look round over my shoulder. All of a sudden quick, I turned back to face him because I had to.

"I've got him!" the naked man yelled as we came together.

He wasn't big, that's how come him to run ahead of the others. I saw the white of his eye shine out in the dark. I just put out my fist and let him rush in against it, and I felt it smack the bones of his face. Over he went, flat down. Then the others were up to me, all round me, all over me.

They all of them seemed to be a-hitting me at once. I hit back my best. I picked out the biggest of them — it was Ottum Orcutt, I saw right off, all humped over with muscle under his hairy hide. I speared him straight in the middle of the mouth and then fetched over my right, rockabye, on his ear, and put two more into his belly while he staggered. I felt him wilt down with it, but meantime those others were a-punching at me, a-kicking at me. I tried to fight all of them at once, the best I could, but I couldn't, even with that first fellow down and out and Ottom limped over on one knee. Another of them sort of spun down, I don't recollect how I hit him to make him fall. My head rang and echoed with fists a-landing against it. Then one of them clubbed me from behind, with maybe a chunk of wood.

All of a sudden I was down, too, down on the gravel, and I thought it would feel right good to lie there, but I mustn't. I rolled over and tried to get up, and meanwhile their naked feet were a-slogging me in the ribs, the back. It was just no use to try to get up against all that. They were all a-kicking me when I was down, and dimly I wondered myself if they'd let me live long enough to be fetched back where Tiphaine waited.

"We've done his business for him," wheezed a voice over me.

Then through the night came the long, throaty crow of a rooster.

"Hark at that!" said another of them. "Let's get out of here!"

Next second they were all gone from round me. No more kicks. I lay there, sort of dim and dreamy in my mind. From off where my wits had halfway pulled themselves to, came a memory of another old saying; that worshippers of the devil can't abide a cock crow.

My head jangled like a rung bell. I began to hurt all through me. I rolled over again and tried to shove a knee under me.

"Take it easy," said a quiet bass voice, near at hand.

A touch on me. I got myself together enough to wiggle clear from it. I hiked up

on my knees, then onto my feet, to fight again if I had to, but it was too much to do. Down I went on a knee again.

"I'm a friend," said the bass voice. "I want to help you."

A hand came down under my arm, to hoist me up. I couldn't have stood up if whoever it was hadn't held me on my feet.

"Let's go," he said.

I sort of stumbled and staggered my way along. I couldn't see, and my head howled. I wondered myself where I was a-being taken to, and if I could make it.

Manly Wade Wellman

What you have read here is part of what I think is my 72nd published book in a long and happy life as a writer.

I was born of missionary parents in Angola, West Africa, in 1903, and was more or less a savage when I got to America six years later. That's when I started trying to write. Living here and there (Washington, DC, Arkansas, Kansas, Utah, New York City) I got an education, did lots of physical work, but was always at the typewriter, telling what I hoped was wonderful stories. I began to sell in college, sold more as I worked on

newspapers, and finally at the bottom of the depression I went full time writing. All those books and some 500 magazine stories and articles. I've done mainstream fiction, juvenile adventure, Southern history, folklore, mystery. But mostly fantasy and science fiction.

I love the Southern mountains, and *The Lost and the Lurking* is a love letter of sorts. As this book appears in print, I'm at work on yet another. I don't know how to stop.

With Gimlet-Point Eyes

The child with the gimlet-point gaze
is eyeing his hoard of square parts;
he is tumbling the gaudy blocks—
they are spelling DISASTER!

The man with the gimlet-point stare
is tumbling his Cadillacs;
he screams while his block towns fall—
having dirtied his space, he YELLS!

— David R. Bunch



Illustrated by Alicia Austin

Old Iwe's eyes darted nervously around the room as he entered. He had passed through ruined corridors where the webs of spiders trembled in the cold wind and vermin darted into crevices and crannies in the fallen stone where they had their nests. This inner chamber had all its walls intact; the flags of the floor were clean-swept and a modest fire burned on the hearth. One wall bore a tapestry in faded purple and gold — the hunt of the unicorn, though the edges were raveled and frayed.

He was a wizened old peasant with a sundark skin and a closed and suspicious expression. His first sight of the wisewoman had surprised him. He had known she was not old, but on first appearance she had seemed a mere girl with her hair loosely woven into a single plait, an odd, pale brown that in the firelight seemed the color of ashes, a loose gown of dun cloth making her body seem fragile and undeveloped. Yet now as the wisewoman faced him, standing in the firelight, he could not have called her a girl. Her eyes were a penetrating clear dark gray and the form beneath the gown had a tense vigor even in repose.

"They said . . . you were a weaver of spells," he said in a peevish rusty-gate voice as he continued looking her over with a surreptitious sidelong gaze.

Graye grew a trifle irritated with the old fool, and there was a muted thumping sound so that Old Iwe looked frantically toward the door. "Soldiers," he said, in a strained voice.

"No." Graye smiled, an old joke with herself.

"Are you sure? The villagers have talked of naught for a month but the slaughter at TorCaerme, and they said the rebels were being harried in this direction by Lutin's men.

"Not soldiers — not this time," said the witch remembering idly when the armies of Prince Lutin had come through, reducing this place to the ruin it now was, killing all the male defenders including a father, a brother and two uncles. She had been taken to a hunting lodge in the hills with Aunt Maev, the *fey* one. There was only the memory, most of it at second hand for she had been young, not much pain, like an old scar, long-healed that one touches, from time to time in reassurance that it's still there. She realized that she had been staring blankly at Old Iwe and forced herself to return to the present moment.

"They say you have Power," he was saying. He scrabbled among the folds of his grimy surcoat and slowly drew out a coin, thin and polished by much

small magic

janet fox

handling. He had Graye's interest, for the moment. Most of the villagers paid in baskets of grain or shoats. "I got me an enemy, lives next to me down past Runningwater. He's been a thorn in my side for years. Claims my fence is built over on his land. I want a curse on him, you know how to do it, a sickness . . . or maybe a fire." His pouched old face dwelt on the delicious possibilities.

The rapping began again, this time in the stones of the wall, mortar beginning to sift down in fine streams. I've was lost in his hate and did not seem to notice.

"No, I can curse no one. My magic is small and peaceful. Herb teas, fortunes sometimes, unbinding . . ."

"That," said the old man, spitting the word like a wad of phlegm, "is no magic at all." His eyes narrowed, filled with an ignorant malice. "So they were wrong about the Power. You're just a woman — like any woman." He stood there silently a moment as his slow mind dredged up other possibilities. He took a step toward her.

As he did, the tapping began again and objects on the table beside them began a sympathetic vibration. Graye pointed to the table, her eyes blank with concentration. A clay jar began to move, very slowly, as if it were something ponderous, inching its way across the scarred wood. Old I've watched it with slack mouth and when it reached the edge and fell to shatter on the stones, he turned and scuttled away, calling querulously on the old gods to defend him. Graye looked down the drafty corridor to be sure that he had gone, then returned to her antique high-backed chair by the chimney corner and sank down exhaustedly. Aunt Maev had talked about this or that member of the family having the Power, as if they could change the course of rivers or move mighty mountains, but what had she done here — put to flight a poor ignorant peasant — what a use for the Power. She wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry about it, so she only sat there for some moments, holding her aching head in her hands.

Not many days later she was bringing some dried herbs into the village for barter when she noticed that few villagers were about, the cottages silent and closed in upon themselves. Crossing the square, silent and patterned in sunlight and shadow, she saw a village woman who had once come to her for a tonic.

"Goodwife, what is troubling this place?"

"Soldiers have been seen, the broken army of the one they called the Wolf of TorCaerne. The Prince is on his heels so both armies may pass this way, and since Branwynhouse is destroyed we have no protection. Perhaps you, with your Power —"

Graye smiled wryly. Didn't the woman know that if the village were invaded their wisewoman could only run and hide with the rest. "I'll do my best," she said ironically and was surprised to see that the woman looked somewhat reassured.

As she walked home under the burden of her sack of meal, she felt a sense of unease as she approached her dwelling. All was quiet, the jagged and fallen stones lightly furred with green moss, frost-touched creepers growing around and through the crumbling walls. She saw the archer out of the corner of her eye, just as he fired. If she had not seen him —

The arrow veered in midflight, swept past her with a hollow whistling. She

heard the man curse at the miss, and she tried to mindgrip a stone at his feet and send it hurtling up at him, but her anger had made her over-reach herself and she only ended up with an agonizing headache, saw-toothed jags of silver moving on the edges of her vision.

He cursed again, stepping out into the open, approaching her without fear. "I could not see you well," he said breathlessly. "I fired not knowing you were a maid; thank the gods you were not killed." He was dressed roughly in a leather shirt topped with light mail. His clothing was grimy as if he'd traveled a long way, but beneath the armor and the grime, he seemed not much more than a boy, loose-jointed and coltish the thin frizz of a blonde beard on his jaws. "I'm scouting for Kyrellin; this is the house of the Brothers Branwyn, is it not?" He spoke gravely, with an authority he didn't quite yet command, as if war were a game he played at.

"It was. Now it's mine. What's left of it."

"I'll need food," he said. "I've ridden all day."

Having recovered from her headache, she led the way inside. The scout rummaged around, helping himself to some bread and apples, wolfing it all down, then looking around for more. Infected for the moment by his enthusiasm she helped him, finding a chunk of salt-meat she'd put by for lean times. "How did you know this was Branwyn?" she asked, amazed at his appetite.

He paused as he fed wood profligately into her fire, making a huge blaze. "Kyrellin is of a branch of that family; he thought to find allies here against the Prince. They are all gone, then?"

"All but me. He will find no allies here. Perhaps he should travel to the south. He might reach the mountains and —"

The young soldier grinned lazily. "Perhaps the Wolf of TorCaerne will want to hear the advice of an adde-headed wench." But he seemed very sleepy now that he had eaten, and he was almost dozing in her chair, with a satisfied look as if thinking that he had made a very successful invasion. It was too bad, thought Graye, that he couldn't rest after his long ride, but she needed a messenger herself.

The rapping sounds along the walls began, letting her know that her Power was returning a little. The soldier's eyes came open suddenly, and he saw her gesture toward the fire, and as if on command, it was leaping at him, showering him with sparks. He jumped up, slapping at his clothing, backing away from her.

"Tell your commander that there is no aid for him here, and that he will find no kinsmen, only enemies." She had not finished speaking when the soldier gripped the door, crying out when he felt its thumping vibration and thrust himself through it.

"And if he does come here I'll —" She waited a moment to be sure he was gone before continuing. "I'll frighten him with noises and with tricks to scare children," she said, breaking into laughter that she had to admit was a trifle hysterical.

SHE HAD THOUGHT the waiting was bad, but when she saw mounted men appear through the trees, she wished for a twelvemonth of the waiting. She let fall the bucket back into the cistern with a hollow echoing splash that

complimented the hollowness she felt inside.

The lead rider's horse stumbled as they reached the summit of her hill, then it groaned and sank down under him, lathered sides pumping. With a low oath the rider extricated himself from the tangled stirrups, drew a knife he carried at his belt and cut the beast's throat. Though it may have been a kindness, the distracted look of anger on his face made it seem more a revenge. What he looked like Graye couldn't tell because of the helmet, the beard and the grime, but she heard one of the others call him Kyrellin.

Having approached them silently and now only standing quietly among twilight's ballooning shadows, she managed to give the impression of almost, a materialization. There was a gabble of perturbation, a few muttered curses, excited horses jerked their heads, caromed off each other. Kyrellin glanced up and then as if trying for effect himself, wiped the knife on the tail of a shirt so filthy it could not be further soiled. She saw that his hands were still stickily red between the fingers.

"She's the one young Olin spoke of," said one of the soldiers. "He called this a witch-house and said he feared to come back here."

Kyrellin shot him a look that silenced him. The others began to calm their mounts and to unsaddle and tend them in embarrassed silence. "Olin lives up to his name," said Kyrellin. "Young . . . and untried." His voice was silken and soothing, a tone Graye did not like — the purr of a tiger. He removed his helmet as he looked at the ruin of the great dwelling and Graye remembered her aunt referring to "that hawk-nosed Kharis branch of the family." A puckered scar was aslant his right cheek and brought the corner of his lip up in a permanent sneer.

"My father spoke of this place. A house to stand against storms, he called it. I had hoped —" He seemed to come back to himself and glared at her angrily as if she had been spying on his inmost thoughts. "Is there no man in charge of the house?"

"As I told you, all died."

"Then perhaps that is why you neglect your duty and allow a kinsman to stand outside in the cold air. A man is needed to set the house to rights and I need a place to quarter my officers while we regroup and plan strategy." As he spoke he was entering without bothering to wait for her invitation, which never came in any case.

"It was a long run from TorCærmæ; I don't even remember what it is to be clean or full-fed or rested." He looked around the inner chambers she had made snug for her own habitation. "I want water to wash with and food, lots of it — enough for all of us — hot." A faint rattle vibration began in a corner of the ceiling but Kyr hardly seemed to notice it.

"There have been no servants here for years," said Graye. "I've become accustomed to fetching and carrying for myself."

"Good, then cousin, if kinswoman you truly are and not some opportunist of a serving wench, you won't mind offering the hospitality due me."

Grudgingly she found a large kettle and depleted her larder to prepare stew enough for all and carried buckets til she was exhausted. She met one of Kyrellin's men in the corridor and saw that he carried a huge cask, astream with cobwebs. "That's my father's — my wine," she as she was shouldered aside

spilling a half pailful of water across her feet.

"And it had better be good," he grinned back at her.

"It's not wise to appropriate the possessions of the dead," she said in a toneless voice.

"Whatever it is they do in the shadowland, I don't think it's drinking," he said flippantly, beginning to notice her in a way she didn't like, "or for that matter —" A good-sized chunk of mortar was dislodged and fell close to him, making him sidestep in surprise and nearly drop the cask. He looked upward suspiciously.

"This is an old house," she said with a faint smile.

"What are you saying, that it's haunted?"

"I only said it was old," she replied, pushing past him to bring the water.

A man shouted to be served and she ladeled out stew, having threaded her way through half-clad bodies to deliver it. The man took hold of the bowl with one hand and put his other arm around her waist, attempting to drag her down onto his lap. He got only the boiling-hot stew as she mindgripped the bowl and tipped it neatly out. Dishes in a cupboard began a sympathetic rattling.

"What's the uproar?" said Kyrellin, naked to the waist, heavily muscled, his chest sooty-dark with hair.

"She spilled soup on me," said the man, holding the steaming cloth of his trousers away from his skin.

"You're a clumsy fool," said another man. "I saw her; she never touched the bowl."

"Somehow, it seemed she did."

"You'd best be out of here," said Kyr and grasping her by the shoulder he steered her toward the door. She moved without speaking, like a sleepwalker. There was something about the touch of his hand, even through the homespun cloth of her gown. There was a humming sensation deep in her brain as of a force building power yet somehow dampened.

He pushed her out into the drafty corridor and slammed the door on her. It was strange but tipping the bowl should have drained her, yet it had not. She felt capable of more than she had ever tried before. But she would wait, for full rack and until they had drunk enough wine to distort even the smallest and most pacific magic into something frightening.

At full moonrise she knelt by the door and listened — loud brutish snores. She pushed back the door and saw the mounded shapes of the soldiers rolled into the blankets by the wan light of the dying fire. She mindgripped the blanket over a nearby sleeper and began to pull it out of his grasp. He sat up, wild-eyed, to see it like something alive sliding off his body to crouch in threatening folds and then jump back at him. By this time, knocking sounds were coming from all corners of the room and the man's full-throated shriek must have pricked the hair at the back of his comrades' necks. She edged two metal bowls off the table where they bounced and rolled, adding to the clamor.

"Witches!"

"The dead!"

She brought back the dying fire for a last hissing burst of bright flame. Half-naked figures leaped about the room, firelight reddening their skin, and there was a general rush to the door which she barely avoided, being so intent on her work. She sent a blanket flapping and flopping after the last man to twine about

nis ankles and make him stumble into the wall.

Silence and darkness throughout the ruined dwelling, only the sour whine of the wind kept outside by the stout walls. The fire had been exhausted by that last burst of energy, and she felt her own Power now dissolved to ashes. She had done more than she had thought possible; she had stretched her small magic to its limits, and the enemy was gone. She bolted her door carefully even though she didn't think they would be back.

She gathered a handful of scattered kindling to revive the fire and dragged her pallet-bed near it in preparation for the night. She was not surprised now that weariness came at her in waves. She cast off the hampering homespun gown, stretched her lean, compactly muscled body in the fire's warmth, undid the strange, no-color hair, translucent in the red light and brushed it, while she tried to remember the words to an old tune. She couldn't remember them; stopped singing and chuckled to herself. "Well, cousin, it's a pity you couldn't stay to lay your plans, but no strategy is needed for a retreat."

Off in a corner something moved, a darkness darker than the shadows around it; then it detached itself from shadow and shambled forward.

"A retreat, cousin, but not a rout."

Kyrellin did not stand quite steadily, and his eyes were bleary from drink, but his voice was still a tiger's purr. "My family talked about the blood of the Branwyn's being tainted by witchcraft. My mother herself had a little of the Power — like that wall tapping that panicked my superstitious officers."

Graye reached for a mindgrip and got nothing, not even a vibration from loose objects in the room. She shivered and wrapped a blanket around herself, but Kyrellin continued to stand just in the shadow beyond the firelight and continued to talk with a deceptive calmness. "The day my mother died a stool flew across the room and smashed to kindling against the wall. I heard the rapping and pretended not to notice it. I baited you, hoping to find out what you could do, but you waited, biding your time until the dark magnified the terror of the unknown. You used your resources well, but they are at an end."

"You don't know that, unless you're gifted as well with the second sight."

"I know it because you're afraid of me and if you could have done anything to me you'd have done it by now." He drew closer, his face swimming out of the darkness as he sat down beside her on the pallet. "You'd be dead now, I think, except that when you took off your garment before the fire, I remembered an old hunger — a man's hunger. You understand." As he spoke he was unwinding the blanket from around her shoulders, pulling it out of her numb hands. And as his fingertips happened to brush her arm, she became aware of a resonant humming deep within her skullbones as of some incomprehensible power building. She had been half hypnotized by the flicker of the fire and his quiet voice, but now she drew away. "Don't touch me," she said through dry lips. "Something is going to happen."

"Yes," he said with a smile the scar pulled into a leer. "Something is." He pushed her roughly backward, and the moment they touched, she felt the energy build to an unbearable tension. From this moment she understood what Aunt Maev had meant when she said The Power. Kyrellin was giving her an earful of barracks language as he mauled her breasts, when even he began to realize that, as she had said, something was happening. The stones of the walls

and ceiling were beginning to vibrate, sending down showers of mortar, and there was a cool, blue other-worldly light in the room.

"We've got to get out of here," shrieked Graye, trying to pull away from him, but he clung to her with a stunned expression as the stones of the wall began to dance wildly and to fall from their places. When a huge stone smashed down beside him, he let go all holds and raced her for the door. Graye was pushed aside but managed to get out just as the ceiling collapsed with a roar. When they had run out into the dooryard and collapsed into a tangle of dew-wet grass and nightblooming flowers, they began little by little to realize that there was to be no more destruction. The ruin still stood in the moonlight like a carious tooth, dust beginning to settle.

"You had me in the palm of your hand the whole time," said Kyrellin. "And yet you waited until —"

"I could have crushed you with a falling stone, had I chosen." Her voice shook, but she pretended it was with cold. "Get me something to put on." She waited breathless to see how he would take to a direct order, but he still seemed a little stunned and cast about until he found a shirt discarded by one of his fleeing men. He was about to put it around her shoulders. "No. Just toss it here."

"You brought down walls and ceiling; the walls shuddered . . . and fell."

She shrugged. "My control was poor, I admit, but —"

"Don't you know that Prince Lutin sits behind his high walls at Lastegarde and thinks himself safe. And the four Unconquerable Baronies of the Plain, his minions. If you could but stand outside those walls and call down your power."

"So you could butcher the inhabitants? I've had enough of falling walls for one night. Do you think you could make us a fire in what's left of my house?" Angriously he stalked off but after a moment she saw him gathering tag ends of fallen branches. She did not think she should try to push him any further. In the morning, unless she told him the truth, he would ride away. And the Power would go with him. She would be safe, safe to go back to living by her wits and deceiving the innocent and ignorant. That had always been good enough before. Still it was hard not to speculate about what it would be like to have real power. Before she could come to any clear decision, she slept.

THE FOLLOWING morning Graye inspected the damage to her house, and in doing so, climbed a crumbling staircase to the top of the one tower still standing. She stood looking out over the countryside, trees foliaged in amber, apricot and dull dry-blood color, the whole scene washed grayly with morning fog. The roof of the tower had long ago fallen in, and she felt the damp chill as the fog condensed into droplets. She had not stood here for a long time, and she had forgotten what a proprietary feeling it was to look over Branwynlands.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs startled her. "You shouldn't have come up here. The staircase might have broken under your weight."

Kyrellin ignored her and looked out over the landscape. The light had shifted and objects began to show through the aura of fog with sharpened reality. "Proud lands," he said. "Your house and all these grounds could be restored if you would agree to use your power against Lutin. I've thought about it until my

head aches and I can't understand why you would not strike having the Power in your hand. Have you grubbed with peasants so long that you've lost all sense of family pride, that you would let the Red Prince and his minions laugh at your father's memory?"

"That is an old war. I was young and knew my father hardly at all. If the dead cry for revenge, I don't hear them."

"A frightened, whey-faced, whining woman," he shouted.

That should have been funny, but somehow she did not find it so, though she knew that by refusing to answer, she would be slamming shut a door on his anger. As though unbidden the words came, "I don't believe you found me so easy to frighten — last night." Too late to take back the words, she realized that he was so unused to being baited that he would react only with violence. He grabbed her wrist and twisted it, and at his touch the stones of the tower groaned, ground together, the landscape lurching unsteadily in the slotted window.

"Let go," she said clawing at his hand as she felt the tower lean outward. "You'll kill us both!"

The stones grew still and the lands around resumed themselves, but there was an air of unsteadiness about the ancient tower. Kyrellin looked at his hand, seeming to take forever to make the connection. "It wasn't you. It was us? Together?"

"We've got to get down from here. The tower is dangerously weak." A certainty dawning, he reached toward her and she had to cringe away.

"Not just your magic? When we touch, mine as well."

"Yes, damn you, do you want us both to die here?"

"I want to — Well, let's get out of this place first."

The stairs shuddered as they eased their way down, and when they had reached the bottom, a gust of wind caught the tower and sent it hurtling outward from the wall. "You meant to let me ride away, not knowing."

"I don't know."

"But now you'd disavow it because I'm a part of the bargain. It's all out of your hands now. I will ride against Lastegarde, and whether you like it or not you will ride with me."

GRAYE MOVED about to try and find a comfortable position in the saddle, but there wasn't one; it seemed the journey was one long ache, but at least they had slowed to a walk. In the dust-whitened men's clothing she wore and with her long hair cut off she felt anonymous among the riders. That had been Kyrellin's idea, and it made sense, but she still faintly angered, since she suspected it was because he didn't want it generally known that a woman rode with him. There was a commotion ahead and she saw men pointing toward rugged hills that were like folds in some coarse golden cloth. Sun glinted blue-black off a structure atop the highest hill, the fort of Wellain. She shaded her eyes to look at it. "It glistens so; is it of glass?"

"They light fires and burn the clay as the wall is built; it gives the material great strength," said Olin who held the rein of the small-boned sorrel she rode. "I wish I knew more of Kyrellin's plan. A frontal assault on Wellain's walls sounds like folly to me."

As they rode, the walls before them grew upward to a great height. They

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could see archers moving along the parapet, and hear their faint voices calling down jibes and obscenities. Kyrellin came to take the rein from Olin. "Now will the Power be tried."

Graye clung to the saddle as he urged his horse into a trot. "There are archers up there — with drawn weapons. What if we were mistaken about the Power?"

An arrow struck the earth a few feet in front of them.

"After seven years of throwing my armies against these invincible walls — this," said Kyrellin disgustedly. He reached over to grasp her hand and stirrup to stirrup they rode toward the walls.

"They're going to fire on us."

"You'll get used to it."

"I don't want to get used to it."

The jeers of those along the top of the wall died as the vibration began to work its way up through the vitrified material. They let loose a rain of arrows, but the brittle glaze of the surface was radiating hairline cracks, flakes of its substance slithering down its sides. Then a whole section broke free and came down. By this time the remainder of Kyrellin's army had moved up, and waited as the substance of the wall was rent and was crumbling to powder around its agonized defenders.

Kyrellin threw the rein to Olin again. "Get her out of here." Graye clung to the saddle as the sorrel struck up a lope behind Olin's gelding. From the summit of one of the cloth-fold hills they watched Kyrellin's army overwhelm the defenders, already stunned and half buried in the debris of their walls. "I knew you were a witch," said Olin, "but this —"

"I did nothing; it was all Kyrellin's work. And if you don't mind, I don't want to watch." She slid to the ground and walked down into a sheltered vale. Olin seemed loath to give up his view of the battle, but after a moment he followed her. "I wasn't running away. Watch the killing if you enjoy it."

"No, I have my orders," he said rather regretfully. She sat down with her back toward him in a path of tall grass, angry that he could play at soldier with such appalling innocence, but when she looked over her shoulder and saw that he was standing guard over her like a sentry, she realized that the innocence would soon be gone. Soon enough he would lose his illusions, and perhaps such a loss should not be taken lightly.

"Can't you sit down, at least, jailor? You're making me nervous." He sensed that she was mocking him and stood his ground for a few moments, but after awhile she heard the grass rustle and felt his shoulders graze hers as he sat.

"It's so quiet here, it could just be the two of us out for a walk, of —" Olin made a slight, disgusted sound. Closing her eyes, she lay back, causing the grass to whisper and give off a pungent spice-smell, and upon opening them she saw Olin looking down at her. "Well," she said, stretching her arms upward so the rough cloth of the shirt outlined her breasts. "I suppose you're still sulking about all the glory you're missing out on."

"No, I'm thinking that you're making fun of me, thinking I'm young and ignorant. . . maybe even virginal." He moved closer and shifted his weight so that he could bend down more closely. "And I'm thinking that you might find out the opposite, much to your surprise," he said, beginning in gruff soldierly

tones that softened as he began to grin. "Only —"

"Kyrellin," she said, finishing the thought. "That bastard intrudes everywhere. I can't protect you from him if he finds out."

"Protect me?" said Olin exasperatedly. "I'm the jailor here." She laughed warmly and drew his weight against her.

With the threat of Kyrellin almost an actual presence their coupling was hasty, reckless, almost desperate, and a feeling of hatred for her situation blocked her pleasure, made the act almost mechanical. "Not so easy," she thought, watching him sleep in the nest of dried grass, "to recapture innocence."

She didn't know how long they had lain there when she heard the thump of hooves on the hard ground and a horse and rider topped the hill. Her first thought was of Kyrellin and she shook Olin roughly, but as the horseman drew near, riding very close upon them so that they had to look up at him as they rearranged their rumpled clothing, they saw with relief that it was only a messenger. He grinned down at them knowingly and addressed Olin. "Wellain has fallen while you — slept. Kyrellin has sent me to say that he would be glad of her company at the evening meal."

From the look of the Great Hall, it was hard to tell that a struggle had taken place. Almost all was in order except for a decorative urn lying broken in a corner. On a dais a huge table was laden with food and watched over by a harried-looking servant who must have been left behind by the former inhabitants. Kyrellin sat drinking from a gold-chased cup, taking his ease at the head of the table as if he were rightful lord here. It should have been a cheering sight, for she was tired and hungry, but in the streets she had passed through she had seen soldiers looting deserted dwellings, setting fires in the streets, reeling drunkenly about. Though she had been conducted here by a special route, she had seen one corpse, eyes turned back whitely, hands clutching emptiness, a smear of blood across belly and groin.

She forced herself to concentrate on where she was instead and saw that Kyrellin wore an unfamiliar garment, dark and rich with winking of threads of silver worked through it. He made a welcoming gesture toward the table and indicated the chair beside him. "All this is ours to enjoy." He drank rapidly, noisily from the goblet as if he would drown himself in it.

"I want none of it."

Kyrellin shrugged and went on eating. The pungent smells of the food made her feel dizzy. After a time she sat down at the far end of the table and took food with the air of one who steals it, eating quickly. They ate in silence, not a festive meal despite the richness of the surroundings. Kyrellin continued to drink deeply. "Now let them run to Lutin with the news that the Wolf has returned," he said. "Let them be afraid."

"Don't vaunt to me," she said pushing her chair back with a violence that overturned it. "Hiding behind magic to play your dirty games." He walked unsteadily toward her, hand lifted as if to strike. "Are you certain you want to touch me — suppose your hands fastened on my throat and you found yourself unable to let go in your rage?"

He paused, his hands falling lifelessly. He looked around at the walls, knowing they would fall and crush them both. "And even if you killed me, the

Power is destroyed. So it seems the only freedom I have left is the freedom to say what I like, and you will control your anger, or choke on it."

He threw the golden cup and swore so loud and vile an oath that the servant darted behind a wall-hanging. Graye held her breath, having no idea what would happen next, but when a moment had passed without violence, she began to feel hope.

"Let me go. Nothing good can come of this alliance."

Kyrellin's voice was low, but the outburst seemed to have cleared his mind.

"Your know I can't."

"Since I can be no further use to you tonight, call my jailor. I'm feeling tired."

He sat down, signalled the poor servant to replace the cup he'd thrown from him. She didn't like the look of calculation that had replaced the bleary drunkenness. "I named young Olin to that post, did I not? Young, yes, but perhaps not so untamed as once he was. I'm told he has grown to enjoy his duties."

She shrugged. "Perhaps. But it was you who gave him power over me."

"It's not his power over you that worries me."

She smiled, slowly and unpleasantly. "Why should you care? You can't touch me, in any case."

"Yes, I remember. You are safe. . . in the eye of the storm. I wonder. . . do you know of a man in my army who is called Hamel? Hamel the Boar he is called. Not a very handsome specimen, I suppose, but he considers himself quite handy with the ladies."

She visualized the man he spoke of, heavy, swarthy, vaguely distorted with his head slightly twisted on his short, thick neck, small porcine eyes close-set and gleaming. "Think of him as your jailor. If I can't touch you, he can, and I would be glad to suggest amorous games to him if his imagination were to fail."

Her voice caught in her throat when she tried to speak. "You would not," she managed to stammer at last.

He smiled but it was with a haggardness that showed how weary he was of the day's fighting. "Of course I would. Think of that before you make yourself disagreeable again."

A CORPSE lay white and naked in a heap of blackened shards, the skin a little bloated. One of his eyelids had been eaten away by vermin, leaving the eyeball bulging obscenely. As Graye sat among the ruins, she heard a rustling in the debris and looked to see the hand of the corpse scrabbling for a purchase on broken stone. She watched horrified as it began to inch forward, wormlike, pulled by first one clutching hand and then the other, the swollen face lolling to one side. The jaw had dropped loosely and from the darkly open mouth came a single echoing word,

"You — oo — oo."

She scrambled to one side of the bed in a convulsive movement, tangled smotheringly in the bedcurtains, fought free and lay there trembling in the dark. She kept herself from crying out to Olin who was outside her door because she was afraid she would see Hamel slouching in through the door in answer to her call. After a few minutes she struggled free of the bedclothes and stood in the chill moonlight of the bedchamber. It was practically empty, having been

cleared out by the fleeing family and then looted by Kyrellin's men. She went to the door and listened — gentle snores — Olin asleep at his post. She pushed against the door, already knowing it was barred from the outside.

Driven by memory of the dream she estimated the position of the bar and tried to get her mind around it. She heard it move against the door, old, dry, light wood, but in the use of the greater Power the lesser had atrophied. She moved the bar a little further, her head throbbing. She forced herself, thinking that those snores in the corridor might be Hamel's in a few days. She was clammy with sweat when the bar slid back enough to let the door swing free; she had just enough strength left to go through it.

The chill air cleared her head as she set out, walking among rocky hills gleaming with frost under the moon's witch-light. There was a village huddled beside the fort's broken walls, but she avoided that, and beyond, the land was barren and thinly settled. She was at first only anxious to put as much distance as she could between herself and Kyrellin, but when the sun rose, she began to think of such necessities as food and water. There was ice here and there trapped in the hollows of rocks, liquifying as the sun rose, but all the food she found were some half dried berries in a stand of spidery black bushes. The plant lore passed on by Aunt Maev judged these as edible so she stopped for a sparse meal.

Evening's light picked her out sharply on the barren terrain, a lone figure still moving with some strength, though that was waning. The wind was cold. She huddled in the lee of a cairn of rocks piled up by earlier peoples to mark who knew what feat of valor. She knew she would have to find real food tomorrow, or her journey would end before it was well begun. She wondered why she hadn't stolen provisions before leaving, or a horse, but it was too late for such regrets. If she managed to reach another settlement, her small magic would convince the villagers to give her food and lodging; it seemed odd to have to rely on those old tricks. She stood looking out over the barren, rock-strewn landscape for some time, as if deciding whether or not to travel on.

She was still standing there when she saw four mounted men top the ridge above her. That they began to shout and lash their horses told her she had been seen. She began to run, dodging patches of loose rock and straggling stands of brush. If she could get over the next hill there was a chance she might find a hiding place in the broken terrain. When she paused at the crest of the hill, her breath wheezing, an open meadow of dry grass stretched away before her. Without any reason except habit she continued to run, but the dulled sound of hoofbeats across turf built from behind and the sweat-gleaming bay shoulder of a galloping mount blurred into her vision to one side, passed by, the rider reining sharply in front of her. She was so tired she didn't know why she didn't fall, but she stood holding her side and trying to breathe as the other riders joined the first. She didn't know their names but she had seen some of them before.

Looking around she saw that her last burst of speed had brought her very near an eroded outcropping of rock, crowned with several boulders. She edged toward it.

"Is this the witch?" asked the man on the bay. He had a round, ruddy face and a great deal of curling hair spilling out from the edges of his helmet.

SMALL MAGIC 127

"This is the one," said a gaunt man whose uniform fit like clothes on a scarecrow.

"Stand away," she said. "You know I have Magic."

The red faced man slid down from his horse. "This witch is too saucy; I'll have to teach her to defer to her betters."

"Touch me and I'll have these stones down around your ears," she said and made a theatrical gesture toward the boulders that balanced so precariously. The ruddy man backed away so rapidly he caught his foot on a branch and fell.

The others laughed uproariously as the gaunt man spurred his horse in close to Graye and reached down to hoist her up behind him when he realized that nothing was going to fall on him.

Graye was stunned for a moment or two and then realized that instead of using her own magic to roll down a pebble or two and perhaps startle them enough to make her escape, she had attempted to bring down the larger stones.

IT WAS DAWN by the time they returned to the Hall. Light from nearly-melted candles in high sconces did nothing but nibble timorously at the heavy gloom of the place, and Kyrellin half drowsing in a tall chair seemed a part of that gloom. "You didn't find it so easy to escape me," he said, almost an anonymous voice from where he sat, half in shadow. But the voice was flat, emotionless.

"What I was running from, no one escapes," she said.

"I don't trust you when you admit defeat."

"I don't. It's just that something is settled, that's all. Time moves only from the known into the unknown, though not always without some struggle, some irrevocable loss."

"I liked you better when you argued; these riddles are beyond me and there's nothing amusing about them." He cleared his throat nervously. "In any event I'll be rid of you soon. Tomorrow we ride on Lastegarde."

"Then it is you who will renounce the Power, and the Wolf of TorCaerme will take up the shepherd's staff. Pardon me, but I doubt it."

"Do you think I loved hauling you along all this time, swallowing your insults. Don't you think I'm tired of hearing about your innocence and my guilt?"

She nodded. "You're right. Responsibility must be the first step."

"The first step to what — damn you!"

"To control."

"You control nothing here. I make the terms. I can send you to your cell, I can choose your jailor, visit on you any indignities I please."

She was silent.

"Speak up, is that not true?" She did not have to speak. Both of them knew it was true and also, that now it didn't matter.

THE WALLS OF Lastegarde rose from morning mists as if they floated on clouds. The sorrel moved at a lope and now Graye managed to follow the movement without thinking. Though before she had accompanied Kyrellin in a state of numb horror, today things interested her. She wondered what the men along the top of the wall were thinking. They didn't jeer or toss down bits of

debris as those in the other forts had. She could imagine what tales had been passed along until they had grown out of all proportion.

When she approached Kyrellin she saw that he was in heated conversation with his highest ranking officers. He looked angry when he mounted as if he were, for once, accepting counsel from others, but doing it grudgingly. His huge black horse grabbed at the bit and he jerked back on the reins, making the monster half rear, rolling white-rimmed eyes. The walls grew more solid out of cocooning mists, sunlight a wall of polished brass behind them. A desultory arrow struck the dust ahead of them. Graye didn't think the defense would be wholehearted. Perhaps Lutin and his family had already fled.

Olin tossed the sorrel's rein to Kyrellin and he looked at it and then at her in a distracted way. "Lastegarde," he said, "just beyond the reach of my hand. If you could understand how I've held this moment before me, a lamp to scatter shadows when they lay deep."

"Let those walls fall then," she said. "For my murdered kinsmen, if vengeance is truly what the dead want." She held out her hand, but Kyrellin refused to take it.

"You don't want vengeance or sovereignty or lands or anything as wholesome as that. You want the Power for its own sake."

"I want to know it, if it's a part of me. All we gave to it was our mutual hatred. We won't know if it's capable of more than pure destruction until we've tested it."

"And in your testing, if you took us both in to the dark and lost us there?" She did not answer and with an oath he tossed the rein to her. "You're no longer chained to the beast-lord. I give you your freedom. At least leave me the dignity of fighting as a man fights."

Since nothing was happening the archers on the wall began to fire, raising a thin cheer when one of their shafts nearly found its mark. "The gates are opening," shouted a soldier. "They've become impatient with us; they're sending out their forces."

"Don't be a fool," said Graye. "It's not in your nature anymore than in mine to settle for what is safe and familiar through fear alone." She thrust out her hand again, not knowing what would come of this alliance, not even needing to know. Kyrellin didn't look happy about it, but light was glinting off the arms of a troop massing just beyond the opened gate. He joined hands with her. Before them was a rending noise, shrill shouts, confusion. Walls were beginning to come down. ●

Janet Fox

I'm at present unemployed and living without visible means of support in Osage City, KS. Up until last year I taught English in the high school, but I decided to quit teaching and take a year off to write. I've been enjoying it shamelessly; guess the ol' work ethic didn't run as deep as I thought.

Sales that I brag about are to *Fantastic, Year's Best Horror, Amazons, and Shadows II*. But if there was a thing with covers and it paid from 1¢ a word to nothing-at-all, the chances are I had a story in it.

DOUBLECROSS!

Paul Dellinger

LOOK, TRUST ME, will you? You've got to believe me. I know it sounds like something out of a grade-Z sci-fi videocassette — *Vampires from Space* — but it's true, dammit! The point is you've got the ear of the president. You can get something done . . .

I know, I know — you'd think it could be worked out, the sharing of a world between daylight and nighttime people. We ought to be able to find a way of accommodating each other, right?

Wrong! We'd just be kidding ourselves to believe that. Make no mistake, it's either us or them. Naturally I want it to be us. That's why I've come to you. If we don't get ourselves organized before they do, it'll be too late.

It's all right, I don't mind your holding that cross. In your position, I wouldn't be completely sure of me, either. At least it shows you're taking me seriously.

Thanks, I will sit down. Yeah, you're right, I'm tired — I've been dodging shadows all night, trying to get here to see you. I guess Roy knew they'd be on the lookout for him, but he knew you and I'd been friends before I left the State Department for honest employment, so he came to me instead.

Go over it again? Okay, but this'll be the last time. Don't ask me how Roy managed to slip off the space lab and come down on the shuttle. I suppose he crated himself in some piece of cargo inside a pressure suit. Just be glad he did, or we wouldn't have known in time about those genetic experiments they've been doing up there . . .

Wait a minute. You did know, didn't you? No wonder you're not surprised. Well, old buddy, they're here. They've been coming down, a few at a time, and turning more and more of us into more and more of them.

I wonder if I can even trust you. Well, as long as you're holding that cross . . .

They'd have had to have approval from you people for those experiments, wouldn't they? Roy said they used to brag up there that anything they could imagine, they could breed — all perfectly safe, of course, since any culture that got out of control could be isolated until it was rendered harmless.

Ha!

I guess it could've been worse, at that. Suppose it had been their supermen that worked out first? Can't you see us inundated with those blue-haired barrel-chested bastards in capes and flights, flying down to dictate our lives and bouncing our bullets into the air if we resisted their benevolent paternalism? Or suppose the psionics had been first? Manipulating our minds, controlling our actions . . .

Yes, there might be worse things than vampires. Might!

Roy said a couple of technicians got nailed first. They got caught on the dark side of the station without protection — crosses, garlic, all that stuff — because of plain carelessness. Then it spread throughout the station before anyone could alert Houston, in time for a missile to end the situation —

Roy? He was just lucky in managing to hide until the next returning shuttle, I guess. He said the idea had been to create the perfect deep space pilot — one who was virtually indestructible, could live without food or even air with a sufficient supply of whole blood for nourishment, in perpetual darkness. In other words, the legendary concept of the human vampire. Well, it worked all right. And before they knew it, the experimenters found themselves as "perfect" as their experiments.

But, like the vampire, they've got their

weaknesses. You don't create a being for that outer darkness and still have a creature of light. Radiation from the sun was deadly to them. Their new cells might absorb metal or plastic, but simple wood — like a state through the heart — still messed them up. But Roy said that maybe, in time, they would manage to overcome those things. You know, living at night only until they find a way to protect themselves from the sun, as our ancestors found ways to protect themselves from the dangers of the night. They wouldn't have to worry about disease. Roy even found himself wondering what kind of literature might be created by a race of immortals. What kind of art? Music?

"They might be more humane than we've been," he told me, "to other living things. They'd have to continue raising animals to supply their sole nutrient, once all humans were absorbed into their kind — oh yes, that works the same way as the vampire legend, too. Once bitten and bled dry, the human becomes a host to that new kind of cellular growth and in effect becomes another vampire. But these new people would use the animals as blood banks, not butcher them. Life would be more sacred than it ever was with humans. Killing would be another sin we've outgrown."

"You sound as though you sympathize with them," I said, bringing into view the cross I was holding behind me. Yes, I was cautious too, just like you. But I stopped worrying when he reached out and plucked it from my hand, showing no reaction.

"Sympathize with them?" he said. "Maybe they're the better race. What was original sin, anyway? Trying to be like God? Creating life? Well, the humans did that. Maybe God's judgement is that they be wiped out and the new race given a try."

"Roy," I said, "If you weren't holding that cross so casually —"

"I know. Like I said, fear of the cross was included as a learned response, like fear of mirrors and all the rest. But a learned response can be unlearned, you know."

"Roy," I said, trying to back away. "You didn't elude them, did you?"

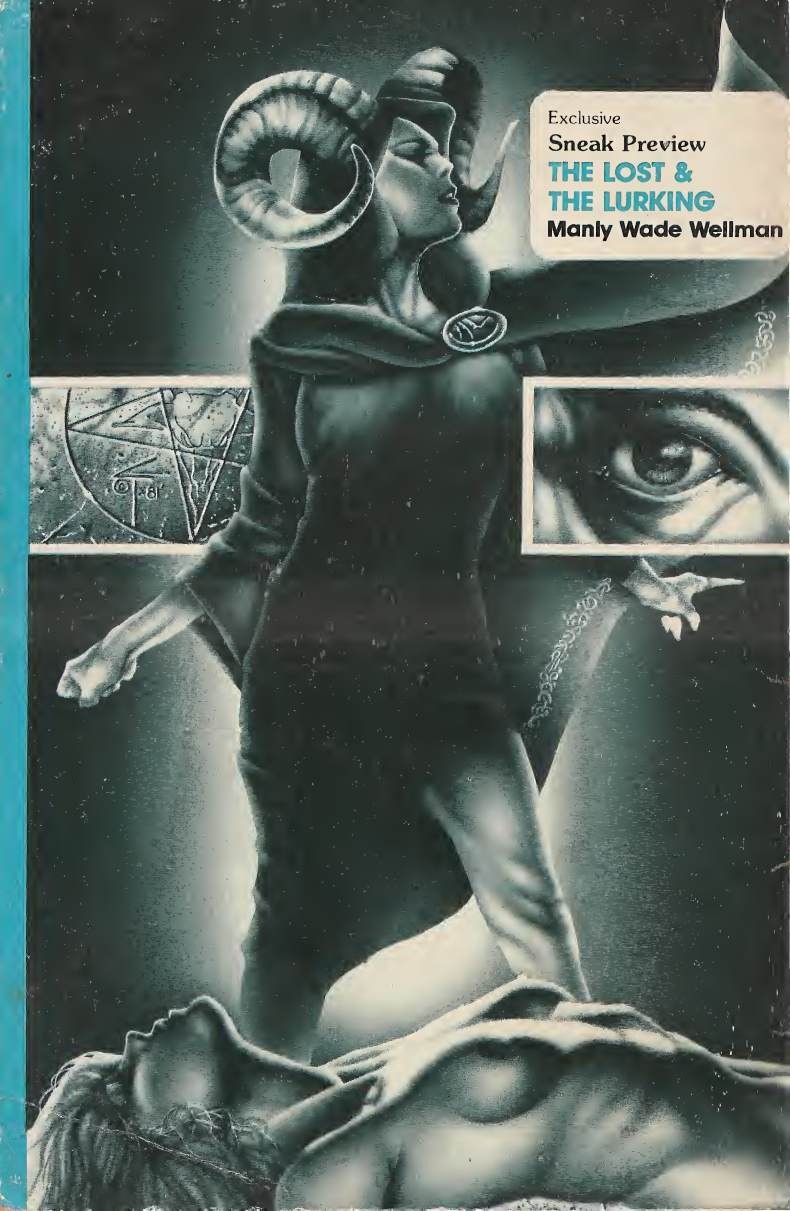
"No," he said, with a smile that exposed two long canine teeth. "They got me. And I've got you —"

Just as I now have you . . . ●

A 250,000 MILE HIGHKU

Cosmic racketball:
ricochetting radar beams
off the moon's surface.

— Peter Payack



Exclusive
Sneak Preview
**THE LOST &
THE LURKING**
Manly Wade Wellman